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Blogs are public sites that document the thoughts, ideas, opinions, and experiences of individuals through posts and images. Initially, these sites were reserved for political and educational discourse. However, the progression of social media and growth of virtual platforms has led to the expansion of blogs, particularly fashion and personal style blogs. Due to this shift in focus, researchers have developed a growing interest in blogs and how they are used to create and communicate online identities.

With online identity development, individuals transfer aspects of the self from offline to online, a structured process that results in the creation of a digital self. Fashion bloggers use digital selves to share capital goods, such as clothing selections and accessories, as well as other appearance-related aspects of their identity, including hair and makeup. Similar to actors on stage, these performances are open to evaluation and criticism. Items that are displayed by the blogger and evaluated by an audience can validate or invalidate the online identity. In the case that the identity is invalidated, the blogger will craft and recraft the identity until approval is received from the audience.

The two-fold purpose of this dissertation was to gain a better understanding of this process, specifically how fashion bloggers use appearance-related components, including capital, to construct online identities and how blog audiences assess the authenticity of these identities. To address this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with four fashion bloggers to understand their experiences in the blogosphere. Themes that emerged from the data were then used to develop a blogger authenticity

scale. This scale was tested in Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) with other related constructs, including blogger responsiveness (H1a-c) and number of sponsorships (H2a-c). Regression was used to determine the relationship between (1) blogger responsiveness and authenticity and (2) number of sponsorships and authenticity. In addition, MANOVA was used to assess gender differences on the three factors of authenticity.

Findings from the in-depth interviews revealed three proposed dimensions of authenticity: (1) cognitive intimacy, (2) affirmation, and (3) transparency. These dimensions were confirmed with the completion of an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). As it pertains to the hypotheses, blogger responsiveness had a significant positive relationship with authenticity (H1a-c supported) while number of sponsorships had a non-significant relationship with authenticity (H2a-c not supported). Lastly, males perceived stronger bonds with fashion bloggers than their female counterparts.

These findings contribute to existing theory and address gaps in the literature. The new blogger authenticity scale adds a dimension to existing theory (identity theory) by addressing fashion bloggers as a relevant and important group of consumers. Moreover, the use of quantitative instruments addresses a gap in the literature by providing support to findings from previous qualitative studies. In addition, the findings have managerial implications, such as the consideration of blogger activity level when selecting brand ambassadors. Limitations include sampling techniques and suggestions for future research include examination of the perceived bond males have with bloggers.

BLOG TO BE REAL: A MIXED METHODS APPROACH TO DEFINING,  
MEASURING, AND DETERMINING PREDICTORS OF  
BLOGGER AUTHENTICITY

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Human life will never be understood unless its highest aspirations are taken into account. Growth, self-actualization, the quest for identity and autonomy, the yearning for excellence must by now be accepted beyond question as a widespread and perhaps universal human tendency. (Maslow, 1954, p. 12-13)

Online communities and social networks are an accepted part of everyday life.

Through the use of virtual platforms, individuals publicly share their thoughts, voice their opinions, and express their ideas with others who have similar goals, beliefs, or values (Kien-Weng Tan, Na, & Theng, 2011). This type of online engagement is particularly popular among teens and young adults, who frequently “hang out, mess around, and geek out” (Magee, Agosto, Forte, Ahn, Dickard, & Reynolds, 2013, p. 1) on social networking sites. Indeed, research shows that these users spend more than 22% of their time developing and sharing content across a wide range of social media technologies, including wikis, forums, and blogs (Ahmad & Laroche, 2017; Doha, Elnahla, & McShane, 2019; Mikalef, Giannakos, & Pateli, 2013).

Among these social media types, blogs provide the most expansive platform for self-expression and identity development (Chittenden, 2010; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Kim, Zheng, & Gupta, 2011; Luvaas, 2013; McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013; Rocamora, 2011). Bearing a strong resemblance to online diaries, blogs are public sites that document the thoughts and experiences of individuals through text-based posts,

images, and videos (Chittenden, 2010). Typically, these postings are personal and independently owned, meaning the blogger has control over the content shared with an audience. This computer-mediated communication (CMC) structure allows bloggers to “present, perform, and find positive reinforcement” (Luvaas, 2013, p. 62) for their personal understandings of self and identity.

Over the past two decades, the blogging community has experienced tremendous growth. The largest increase, equivalent to 165 million blogs, occurred between 2006 and 2011 (Kim et al., 2011). While some of this growth has been attributed to corporate blog use, the proliferation of a new blog genre – leisure blogs – is responsible for most of it. Defined as “spaces wherein a self is articulated” (Rocamora, 2011, p. 411), leisure blogs are primarily concerned with the everyday practices of individuals. For example, *Cupcakes and Cashmere* is a lifestyle blog that documents the preferences of designer, Emily Schuman. From home décor and seasonal recipes to beauty secrets and party tips, Emily’s blog is described as the ‘must have’ guide for those who appreciate the little pleasures in life and want to develop a sense of self through them (Cupcakes and Cashmere, 2018).

One of the most popular subgenres of leisure blogs is the fashion blog or personal style blog (Huang, 2015). Fashion blogs differ from other types of leisure blogs, primarily in terms of purpose, design, and narrative. With this particular platform, bloggers choose an identity through which to communicate their relationships with and expertise about fashion (Kaye, 2007; Rocamora, 2011; Titton, 2015). In some cases, this online identity is an authentic representation of the individual’s offline persona and

portrays the actual self. In others, this identity is far removed from the individual's offline persona, serving as the basis, or foundation, for a new digital self (Rocamora, 2011; Belk, 2013). Indeed, it is the ability to “express this sense of identity and share the hedonic experience” (Taylor, Strutton, & Thompson, 2012, p. 18) through technological means that makes fashion bloggers atypical among the broader blogging community.

As content creators, bloggers use posts and images about fashion and related topics to convey an online identity to an audience, and this identity may or may not coincide with the offline self. Although the notion of an online identity has been the central focus of a number of studies, especially the idea of a digital self (Belk, 2013), prior research has not addressed how fashion bloggers develop online identities in the blogosphere. Moreover, prior research has not examined how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these online personalities. Therefore, this dissertation addresses gaps in the literature by providing an in-depth qualitative investigation of the identity development of fashion bloggers and developing and empirically testing a measure of blogger authenticity from the perspective of the blog audience.

## **Background**

According to Rocamora (2011), the blogosphere is a powerful social laboratory for experimenting with constructions and reconstructions of self. Fashion blogs, in particular, provide a platform for the construction of a digital self through narrative threads that capture the look and style of the blogger (Titton, 2015). Primarily illustrated in the form of written posts and carefully studied self-portraits, these narrative threads help bloggers share information about their favorite brands, products, trends, and styles.

In most instances, this information originates on the blog and then slowly filters to other social media outlets, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. As such, the success of a fashion blogger is measured beyond the scope of the blog, mainly in the form of likes, followers, and subscribers. To fully understand how fashion bloggers use these tools to construct an online identity, this section includes an overview of the digital self, appearance, social media, and interpersonal relationships relative to the study.

### **The Digital Self**

The philosophical proposition, “I think, therefore I am,” is pinned as one of the first attempts at verifying existence (Descartes, 1637). Considered a precursor to identity, existence was commonly used to challenge the skepticism associated with everyday human thought. The premise for this mode of thinking stemmed from the idea that thoughts could not be separated from individuals; therefore, individuals who were able to construct thoughts must exist as unique beings (Descartes, 1637).

With the progression of social media platforms and the proliferation of users, the philosophical notion of existence has extended beyond its original body-related boundaries. Moreover, today, some individuals are not satisfied with simply existing. Instead, they must make their existence known to the public via the Internet through written, verbal, and non-verbal communication methods. In an offline setting, an identity is established through face-to-face, embodied interactions between people that gives authenticity to that identity (Goffman, 1959), whereas in an online setting, identities are created by the user and regulated by others who provide direct feedback in an environment designed specifically for this purpose (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Crafting and developing an online identity is a time-intensive process. It is not unusual for individuals to spend hours perfecting a digital self. This reembodiment process includes “designing the online user, giving it a name, learning to operate it, and becoming comfortable with it” (Belk, 2013, p. 481). Once the digital self is established, it becomes part of the individual’s daily life. As Bartle (2004) explains, “you are not role-playing a being, you *are* that being; you are not assuming an identity, you *are* that identity; you are not projecting a self, you *are* that self” (p. 155).

One consideration of online identity development is the level of commitment made to the online self-presentation. Research suggests that when individuals publicly share their lives with an audience, they become more committed to the self-presentation behavior (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Kelly & Rodriguez, 2006; Schienker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994; Tice, 1992). If the self-presentation behavior is different in offline and online settings, it results in an identity shift (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). In this case, the identity will continue to shift until the behaviors coincide and the individual commits to one aspect of the self.

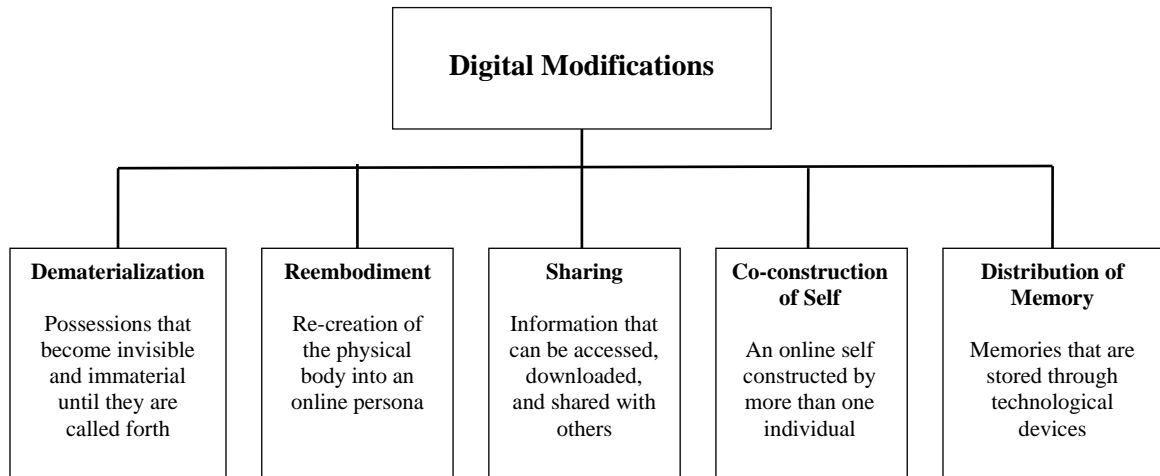
One issue relative to online identity development is the extent to which self-construction offline transfers to self-construction online. In an offline environment, possessions are considered an important part of self-construction. Because individuals invest “effort, time, and attention” (Belk, 1988, p. 144) into possessions, these possessions are considered part of an extended, or cultivated, self and critical to one’s identity development. However, in an online environment, possessions are liquidated and this notion of an ‘extended self’ is modified to include newly defined virtual aspects,

such as “images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation” (Turkle, 1995, p. 178). Oftentimes, this shift in meaning changes the dynamic for digital users, who are “more actively managed, jointly constructed, interactive, openly disinhibited, confessional, multiply manifest, and influenced” (Belk, 2013, p. 490) by others they engage with online.

Belk (2013) addresses these technological changes through an examination of five modifications to the extended self: (1) *dematerialization*, (2) *reembodiment*, (3) *sharing*, (4) *co-construction of self*, and (5) *distributed memory*. *Dematerialization* refers to possessions, such as photographs and music, that are tangible in the offline world, but do not have a material form in the online world. *Reembodiment* is a representation of the self that is constructed using tools that alter the offline self-presentation. *Sharing* occurs when information is made available and accessible to others. *Co-construction* takes place when others help with the construction of an individual and joint extended sense of self. Lastly, *distributed memory* refers to the outsourcing of stored information into digital archives. Figure 1 outlines these digital modifications based on the definitions provided by Belk.



Figure 1. Five Digital Modifications of the Extended Self



Adapted from: Belk, R. (2013). Extended Self in a Digital World. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(3), 477-500.

Fashion bloggers are closely linked to all five of these digital modifications. First, *dematerialization* is shown through the digitization of appearance via photographs. Rather than take a photo using film that has to be developed, bloggers use technology tools that allow them to immediately upload digital images in real time and across various media sites, such as Instagram and Flickr, for their audience members to view. Moreover, these digital images are not untouched; they are altered by image-editing software, such as Photoshop, which allows for *reembodiment* of the physical body. As this information is *shared* with audiences, bloggers encourage participation in their *construction of self* through comments or the feedback feature available to the blog audience. This differs greatly from the way interactions are conducted in an offline context. In face-to-face interactions, individuals must reveal their true or authentic selves. However, in the blogosphere, audience members can choose to respond either anonymously or in an

identifiable way, which would allow bloggers to use *distributed memory* to recall comments associated with a specific post at a later time.

As the life of the blogger is moved from offline to online, a new identity is developed with features that can be distinguished from the former self (Kim et al., 2011). According to Rocamora (2011), this new identity is “lodged in the surface of the body,” but given material presence through its visuality on the computer screen (p. 415). Considered a space for identity construction, Turkle (1995) states that the computer screen “allows individuals to project themselves into their own dramas, dramas in which they are the producer, director, and star” (p. 26). As such, this identity structure makes the blogger feel that a new character has emerged, one that is different from those who engage and interact in the surrounding environment (Kim et al., 2011). For fashion bloggers, a critical aspect of this identity structure is appearance.

### **Appearance and Identity**

Appearance, in its simplest form, is the way an individual looks or appears through gesture, location, and dress. For fashion bloggers, appearance refers to the visual cues (i.e., makeup, hair, and dress) used on blogs to communicate their self-accomplishment (Rocamora, 2011). In this dissertation, dress, or “the intentional modifications and supplements added to the body” (Roach & Eicher, 1995, p. 15) is the component of appearance that is the primary focus, as it imparts value to the wearer through reflected appraisals and imagined judgments.

Modifications refer to the deliberate changes made to one’s physical appearance (Roach & Eicher, 1995). These changes in appearance may be temporary or permanent

and typically include adjustments made to the hair, skin, nails, muscular structure, and teeth. Body supplements refer to a category of items that may be added to the body as enclosures, attachments, or attachments to enclosures (Roach & Eicher, 1995).

Enclosures include items that are wrapped or suspended to the body, such as a bracelet or coat, while attachments include items that are inserted or clipped, such as a pair of earrings. These modifications and supplement types are the primary ways that individuals show distinctiveness and communicate aspects of the self.

An individual's dress, with all its requisite components, makes a statement. Whether it be age, social class, gender, or religion, the meanings communicated through dress are uniquely personal, completely social, and based on each person's subjective interpretation (Roach & Eicher, 1995). Further, the meanings an individual attributes to dress are based on "his or her socialization within a particular cultural context and the improvisations given to dress in specific social situations" (Roach & Eicher, 1992, p. 4). Although these meanings are personal and intimate, they extend beyond the scope of the presenting individual. As such, evaluations are made about dress, or appearance, which appear in two distinct formats: (1) responses made about the wearer by others who review the presentation and (2) responses made about the wearer by the wearer who gives the presentation (Stone, 1962). When the collective group of responses from both parties coincides, the self is authenticated or validated. Conversely, when the responses are disparate, the self is challenged and a reevaluation of the presentation is required. Thus, validations and challenges experienced by the wearer are said to be "aroused by personal appearance" (Stone, 1990, p. 142).

This process, formally known as Program and Review (Stone, 1962), has been used to categorize individuals based on perception (as cited in Roach & Eicher, 1995). An example of this can be seen during the Industrial Revolution when factory-made clothing started to replace custom or made-at-home styles. As dress items became accessible to the public, the result was a diffusion of social power. Women, who were previously shadowed by their husbands, started to communicate power through appearance and serve in roles that directly reflected their husband's wealth and prosperity (Kaiser, 1998; Miller-Spillman, Reilly & Hunt-Hurst, 2012), while women of the lowest stature imitated their affluent counterparts and created the illusion of wealth.

More recently, this notion of perception has been discussed as it pertains to the use of dress on social media platforms, such as Second Life and fashion blogs. For example, Second Life, a 3D virtual world, uses dress items to develop a social code among players. Participants in the game are asked to select from a vast number of options, including "body shapes, clothing, accessories, and movement" (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 168) to create an avatar, or figure, that is representative of their real, or ideal, selves. With the availability of these online tools, players have considerable leeway in their online visual-self-presentations (Belk, 2013). In a similar manner, fashion bloggers use dress to communicate their identities openly and freely with an audience. Through the sharing of digital photographs and blog entries, bloggers express their love of fashion to others who understand and appreciate their quest for autonomy. It is within this virtual reality that bloggers self-fashion, self-create, and self-identify with others to create an identity for themselves.

Online identity development is a complex topic. As such, in this dissertation, identity theory is used as a conceptual point of departure. According to Stryker and Burke (2000), a constructed self is composed of multiple identities, of which each identity is tied to a role within a social structure. Because of these varying roles, individuals often find themselves in situations where they must choose between two actions related to their self-definition (Kang, Sklar, & Johnson, 2011). For example, fashion bloggers serve in various roles, ranging from digital consumers (Fiore, 2008) to consultants (Rocamora, 2011) to stylists (Chittenden, 2010). As digital consumers, bloggers look for items and gather product information for their audiences. As consultants, bloggers answer questions and provide details about products. Finally, as stylists, bloggers recommend or dissuade the purchasing of products based on certain attributes. While some bloggers embrace all of these roles, others select one to be primary to their identity and discard the others.

As with other online modes of identity and in accordance with the evolved identity theory (Stryker, 2007), the commitment [or non-commitment] fashion bloggers have to these roles is part of their overall identity development. That is, when bloggers commit themselves to a role, they internalize the meanings associated with that particular role and it becomes part of their constructed self. Conversely, when bloggers discard a role, they detach themselves from any meaning and the role becomes irrelevant. For example, when bloggers accept endorsement deals from corporate sponsors, they will likely become more concerned with the consultant and stylist roles and less concerned with the consumer role. Because sponsored bloggers do not have to search for items or

gather product information on their own, the digital consumer role is considered insignificant and it is temporarily discarded.

This selection of roles has a direct impact not only on the blogger, but the audience as well. Thus, if the digital consumer role is rejected for a sponsorship deal, and the blogger's audience members expect the role to be fulfilled, the result may be dissonance between them (Williams & Hodges, 2015). Audience members may begin to question the credibility and authenticity of the blogger, which creates a vulnerable position. For the blogger, this is a complex issue, as it affects future choices about role selection and, ultimately, identity development. This dilemma was found to be the case in preliminary research conducted on fashion bloggers and sponsorship (Williams & Hodges, 2015). Hence, as will be discussed in Chapter II, the concepts of cultural, social, and symbolic capital are clarified, as they are pertinent to understanding how bloggers establish legitimacy through identity development in the blogosphere.

### **Symbolic Interaction and Social Media**

Individuals structure identity through carefully planned behaviors. However, one must interact with others in order to establish and maintain this identity (Goffman, 1959). Invoking the theatrical metaphor of dramaturgy, Goffman (1959) first illustrated this relationship between identity and behavior in his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He explained the process by which individuals select from a collection of identities within two defined categories: (1) *front stage behavior* and (2) *back stage behavior* (Goffman, 1959). When *front stage behavior* is put on display, individuals conduct themselves in a manner that is acceptable to others and follows societal norms.

However, when *back stage behavior* is shown, individuals are released from the pressures imposed by others, allowing them to reveal their true, authentic selves.

Recent research has linked Goffman's dramaturgical approach to fashion blogging (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Bloggers, who role-play as actors, display front stage behavior on their blogs through the promotion of capital goods, such as brand name clothing and accessories. Carefully selected, these clothing items are offered maximum visibility, as bloggers display them while attending high profile events and on travel excursions. Picturesque locations, combined with fashions and styling that resemble the top fashion magazine layouts, have given this group of consumers a strong voice in the fashion world. With a cycle of ongoing performances, the blogosphere provides a backdoor into an industry that previously afforded such everyday individuals no possibility of entry (Luvaas, 2013).

Through these symbolic performances and appearances, bloggers establish, maintain, and alter their identities. From the consumption of clothing items to the wearing of makeup, bloggers use appearance to identify with a specific brand community, subculture, or group. In a perfect world, this chosen community has an audience that emerges from a group of consumers who are pursuing related identity projects (McQuarrie et al., 2013). However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, the audience is an eclectic mix of individuals, all of whom evaluate the blogger on an overall performance. Should this be the case, the blogger may have to craft and recraft the online identity numerous times before approval is received from the audience.

## **Interpersonal Relationships**

Performances are evaluated by audience members who may or may not have a strong interpersonal relationship with the blogger. In social psychology, concepts, such as psychological closeness and parasocial interaction, have been used to describe the structure of these interpersonal relationships and explain how they are affected by human behavior (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Hahn & Lee, 2014). Hahn and Lee (2014) describe psychological closeness as a “perceived similarity, or feeling at home, as though one can really talk to and has something in common with another person” (p. 106). In an online context, psychological closeness may be one-sided or two-sided, depending on how involved the audience member is with the media performer. Conversely, parasocial interaction refers to strictly one-sided relationships with the media performer that develop and strengthen over time. These interpersonal relationships are “similar to – and as powerful as – electronic word of mouth (eWOM) relationships” (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011, p. 314), which have the potential to reduce uncertainty and increase trust.

As it pertains to the study of fashion bloggers, a two-sided interpersonal relationship is present when an audience member reads the blog, provides feedback to the blogger in the form of a comment or question, and the blogger responds. This conversational communication style encourages the type of bonding and intimacy that naturally occurs with friends (Halvorsen, Hoffman, Coste-Maniere, & Stankeviciute, 2013). A one-sided interpersonal relationship is present when an audience member reads the blog and provides feedback to the blogger, but the blogger does not respond to the comment or question. In this scenario, the audience member is unable to connect with the



blogger directly, but strong feelings continue to develop regardless of the missed opportunity (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011).

Considered an extension of social interaction, psychological closeness and parasocial interaction have been used to examine the effects of repeated blog exposure and the role of trust in one-sided and two-sided blog relationships. For example, bloggers who are actively involved with their audience members are viewed as trustworthy (Halvorsen et al., 2013), credible (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011), knowledgeable (Kretz, 2012), inspirational (Martinez Navarro & de Garcillan Lopez-Rua, 2016), influential (SanMiguel & Sadaba, 2018), and authentic (Marwick, 2013). Similar feelings are present in one-sided relationships when audience members are repeatedly exposed to blog content (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011), preoccupied with the blogger's appearance (Hahn & Lee, 2014), and invested in the blogger's everyday life (Kretz, 2012).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

In recent years, fashion bloggers have gained a significant amount of power, which has led to their growth and development as leaders in the fashion industry (Chittenden, 2010; Esteban-Santos, Garcia Medina, Carey, & Bellido-Perez, 2018; Fiore, 2008; Pedroni, 2015; Rocamora, 2011). Despite the increasing influence that fashion bloggers have on consumer decision-making and the need for marketers to cultivate these opinion leaders, few studies have examined how bloggers' identities are developed. Moreover, prior research has not adequately addressed consumer perceptions of authenticity in the identity development of fashion bloggers. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to understand how fashion bloggers use appearance-related components,

including capital, to construct online identities and how blog audiences assess the authenticity of these identities. Four research objectives were developed to address this purpose: (1) to investigate the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction, (2) to explore the role of appearance and capital (i.e., clothing) in this construction, (3) to develop and empirically test a new scale for blogger authenticity, and (4) to understand how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these online personalities.

To address the research purpose and objectives, data were collected within the context of the blogosphere. As a platform used to promote open communication and detailed discussions (Rocamora, 2011), the blogosphere contains publicly shared information that can be analyzed or reviewed by individuals who share similar interests with the blogger. Relative to the fashion blogging community, these interests range from broad (i.e., general fashion items such as clothing and accessories) to specific (i.e., brand names), depending on the goal of the blog audience member. This exchange of information makes the blogosphere an ideal social media platform on which to discuss the topic of this dissertation, as content will reveal how bloggers engage with their audiences and use these interactions to construct an online self (McQuarrie et al., 2013).

### **Methodological Framework**

As will be discussed in full within Chapter III, a mixed methods approach was used to gain a better understanding of the topic. Specifically, a phenomenological research design served as the methodological framework for the qualitative component, wherein the core of human thinking is understood through a high level of interaction between researcher and participant (van Manen, 1990). It is through such interaction that

researchers collect data from participants and analyze their experiences. Moreover, a descriptive research design was used to measure and quantify the phenomenon, which allowed for the generalization of findings (Williams, 2007). With this type of design, researchers collect numerical data from participants and analyze it using mathematically based methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

To address the first two objectives, two qualitative methods that support the investigation of meaning in experiences were employed: observation and interviews. Specifically, netnographic observation was employed through the examination and documentation of fashion blog posts. The posts written by bloggers discussed a range of topics, including day-to-day activities, fashion selections, wish list items, and other relevant issues, including promotions by retailers (Chittenden, 2010). This observation was conducted for a 16-week period, during which time the “needs, desires, meanings, and choices” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62) of fashion bloggers and their audience members were examined. This task was completed through the recording of verbatim blog posts and audience members’ reactions. As a result of these efforts, two types of online data were captured: (1) data that researchers directly copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and (2) researchers’ observations of the community and its members, interactions, and meanings (Kozinets, 2002).

In addition to netnographic observation, interviews were employed to better understand the meaning of bloggers’ experiences (Merriam, 1998). The four bloggers selected to participate in the interviews had been active for the past twelve months and followers who commented on their blog entries every week (Chittenden, 2010;

Rocamora, 2011). These criteria allowed the data to be collected and analyzed from the perspective of the participants, emphasizing their “specific statements and experiences” (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 52), rather than the perspective of the researcher. Moreover, the data collected from these interviews and observations provided insight into how individuals perceive, interpret, feel, value, and construe their world, which serves as the foundation for phenomenological research (van Manen, 1975).

To address the third objective of the study, an authenticity scale was developed from data collected in the observations and interviews. Items in the scale were structured around the appearance and self-presentation behavior of fashion bloggers. To determine suitability of the items, the scale was evaluated by the dissertation committee for face validity and then purified using data collected from a sample on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). To support validity of the scale, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using data collected from a second sample of MTurk participants. According to Churchill (1979), factor analysis is used to “confirm whether the number of dimensions conceptualized can be verified empirically” (p. 69).

To address the fourth objective of the study, survey data were collected from the blog audience to gain a better understanding of how they perceive the role of authenticity in bloggers’ identity construction. Prior to starting the survey, participants responded to two screening questions: (1) *Have you ever visited a fashion blog?* and (2) *Have you followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer for at least six months?* By employing these criteria, data were collected from participants who visit fashion blogs and who are familiar with the bloggers. It is through this data collection method that the reality, as the

audience perceives it, is “studied, captured, and understood” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9) without direct involvement on the part of the researcher.

### **Scope and Significance of the Study**

The recent popularity of blogs has made it a topic worthy of investigation. From approximately fifty blogs in 1999 to over 440 million blogs in 2018, the blogosphere has become more than a platform for political and educational discourse. Indeed, following the introduction of the first teen fashion blog, *nogoodforme*, in 2003, the blogosphere has experienced exponential growth, especially in the area of leisure and lifestyle blogs. For fashion-related blogs in particular, the number of blogs increased from a single blog to two million in a seven-year period. With the creation of 75,000 blogs per day (Kim et al., 2011), bloggers are making their presence known in the era of social media.

Fashion bloggers, as defined in the literature, are “gatekeepers of fashion knowledge that play the role of mediator between producers and consumers” (Zhang, 2010, p. 155). Through personal writing and self-made images, bloggers share their thoughts and opinions about fashion, including makeup, clothing, and accessories, as well as other lifestyle components, including food, fitness, and family. In the present study, the creation of social identities and the role of these identities in the development of fashion blogs is explored. With this information, bloggers can better understand the impact that self-presentation has on aspects of identity (i.e., authenticity) and use this information to develop a brand strategy. Given the unique status and perspective of fashion bloggers, an understanding of their practices would have significant implications for consumers who consider them reliable sources of product information. According to

Marwick (2013), when bloggers are seen as trustworthy, credible, and reliable, consumers will use their blogs as a reference point prior to making a purchase.

Uncovering how bloggers construct online identities and develop blogs is a precursor to understanding how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these identities. Identity theory, as a theoretical underpinning, contributes to the understanding of fashion bloggers and their roles within the blogosphere. While these roles have been clearly identified in previous studies (Chittenden, 2010; Fiore, 2008; Rocamora, 2011), the digital self that emerges from these roles has not been examined from the viewpoint of personal bloggers or their audience members. Thus, this dissertation addresses an existing gap in the literature that will deepen and broaden the scope of knowledge relative to identity construction in the fashion blogging community.

Moreover, a mixed methods approach allows for exploration into the meaning that bloggers give to interactions and experiences. Insight of this nature is imperative to the advancement of the topic, given that prior blog studies have relied primarily on a netnographic approach to data collection. That is, few researchers have actually talked to bloggers. Interviews with US based, female fashion bloggers allowed for an in-depth evaluation of their thoughts and feelings, insight which cannot be attained through purely netnographic observation. Conversely, an examination of blog posts supplemented the data obtained from interviews, allowing for a broad understanding of the factors important to identity development. Finally, survey research captured the perspective of the audience, providing a nomothetic approach to understanding the lives and identities of fashion bloggers. While prior research has addressed the extent to which individuals

engage online to construct a social identity (Chiu, Huang, Cheng, & Sun, 2015; Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010; Engholm & Hansen-Hansen, 2014; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Tanti, Stukas, Halloran, & Foddy, 2011; Xiao, Li, Cao, & Tang, 2012), few studies have examined blogger authenticity from the perspective of the blog audience.

Studies about fashion bloggers are limited in scope, especially when it comes to identity formation in the blogosphere. Of these studies, the few that reference the identities of bloggers do not focus on how the identities are created. Instead, these studies discuss how the identities are communicated to others. Fashion bloggers, as a cultural phenomenon, is an area in need of further study due to the impact these individuals have within today's marketplace (Marwick, 2013).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the purpose and objectives of the study were outlined. In addition, justification was provided for the examination of fashion bloggers and the environment in which they develop online identities. The methodological framework was described, methods pertinent to this framework were outlined, and theoretical considerations were discussed. Finally, the scope and significance of the study were discussed. The next chapter provides a review of literature relevant to the topic of fashion blogging and identity development.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As discussed in the previous chapter, the purpose of this dissertation is to understand how fashion bloggers use appearance-related components, including capital, to construct online identities and how blog audiences assess the authenticity of these identities. Four research objectives were developed to address this purpose: (1) to investigate the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction, (2) to explore the role of appearance and capital (i.e., clothing) in this construction, (3) to develop and empirically test a new scale for blogger authenticity, and (4) to understand how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these online personalities. Thus, the goal of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive review of the literature that will aid in addressing these objectives. In the following sections, three core concepts – identity, authenticity, and capital – are used to explore literature relative to the topic.

In the first section of this chapter, identity is introduced from a philosophical and sociological perspective. This introduction is followed by an overview of identity theory, which explains how individuals apply meaning to their role-based identities. Lastly, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach and Stone's (1962) Program and Review are referenced to describe the role of social interaction in the development of these identities. Through a review of the literature, an in-depth understanding of fashion bloggers and their role-related behaviors can emerge. Furthermore, an in-depth discussion



of online identity development addresses an existing gap regarding the identity construction of fashion bloggers and how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these identities.

In the second section of this chapter, authenticity is introduced as a concept and literature that examines authenticity is discussed from the perspective of the consumer, specifically as it relates to the overall consumption experience. This discussion is followed by an overview of literature on digital selves, which describes how an individual creates an identity online or transfers an identity from offline to online. An examination of these modifications helps define the process that is used to create or modify an online identity. Additionally, an in-depth discussion of authenticity as it relates to these modifications provides a better understanding of how fashion bloggers communicate and the perceived credibility of their communications in the blogosphere.

In the last part of this chapter, two forms of capital – cultural and social – are introduced. Once defined, literature on the roles of cultural and social capital in the identity development process is presented and discussed. An examination of this literature as pertinent to identity development allows for a deeper understanding of fashion bloggers and how they use the blogosphere as a platform to construct digital representations of the self. Moreover, a discussion of these concepts emphasizes the importance of capital relationships in the creation of an online identity. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research objectives relative to identity development in the fashion blogosphere.

## Identity

Rene Descartes, a 17th century French philosopher, introduced the principle of identity through his seminal work, *Discourse on Method*. Based on the notion of existence, Descartes (1637) posited that everyday thoughts, specifically those rooted in doubt, proved the reality of one's mind. This proposition, referred to as "*Cogito ergo sum*" or "I think, therefore I am," became a fundamental element in the study of identity, as it positioned the self as a thinking entity that could be shaped or modified through the use of deduction and reason (Descartes, 1637). Indeed, the philosophical belief that the mind and body are a vital union helped establish identity as a concept for future research studies (Chittenden, 2010; Rocamora, 2011).

Three centuries later, Gregory Stone, an American sociologist, added an appearance component to the study of identity. This contribution changed the conceptual structure in that identity was no longer synonymous with thoughts or actions of the self. Rather, identity became the meaning situated in and negotiated through symbols in social interaction (Stone, 1962). The primary outcome of these interactions was the construction of a self that reflected the appearance-related choices made for identification and differentiation in everyday life. It was from this perspective that identity emerged as a socially constructed concept that harbored "personalized relationships with individuality, modernity, culture, and clothing" (Breward, 1995, p. 112).

Over the years, this proposition about identity has been integrated into theoretical perspectives that focus on social structures, the structure of self, and social behaviors (Mead, 1934; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In the next section, identity theory, the perspective

most relevant to this dissertation, is discussed as it pertains to roles, the assumption of roles, and the impact of roles in society.

### **Identity Theory**

Within the sociology literature, identity theory is described as an extension of the symbolic interactionist perspective (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The premise of this theoretical approach is that individuals create symbolic meaning through multiple roles played in highly differentiated contemporary societies. These roles, according to Stryker and Burke (2000), help individuals enter into “relatively small and specialized networks” embedded in and influenced by larger social structures (p. 285). That is, smaller networks serve as stepping stones for individuals to enter into larger, more restricted networks. As these network connections grow and more roles are accepted, individuals are forced to make decisions regarding their social behavior. Stryker and Burke (2002) refer to these behavioral options and the decisions regarding these options as role choice behavior. Relative to identity theory, role choice behavior implies that the self is reflexive, meaning it can be “categorized, classified, or named” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 224) in ways that relate to other social categories or classifications. From this reflexive process, known as identification, individuals create a set of standards to guide their role-based behaviors and help construct new identities (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stets & Burke, 2000).

The likelihood that an individual will assume one role over another has been a topic of much debate (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). To address this concern, Stryker and Serpe (1982) examined two components of role commitment. The

first of these components, *level of commitment*, refers to the number of people an individual is tied to when he or she assumes a particular role. In this instance, the likelihood that a role will be activated is based solely on the number of people affected by the decision. Conversely, the second component, *strength [or depth] of commitment*, refers to how strongly people are tied to a particular role. In this case, the likelihood that a role will be activated is based on the strength of the relationship.

Research studies about identity theory, and role commitment in particular, have contributed to the understanding of personal networks and their influence on identity construction. For example, Walker and Lynn (2013) used identity theory to examine the link between network structure and role identity salience. To assess this relationship, the authors identified two features of personal networks that impact an individual's decision to enact a role-based identity: (1) the proportion and strength of ties to role-based others (RBOs) and (2) the breadth of access that a role-based group (RBG) has to the rest of an individual's network (Walker & Lynn, 2013). Then, through an application of these features, Walker and Lynn (2013) investigated three role identities – student, work, and religious – that commonly define an individual's personal social network. Findings from the study suggest that the extent to which a role-based group is tied to an individual's network is associated with the salience, or acceptance, of a particular identity. However, the proportion and strength of ties was not deemed a factor in the salience of this identity. While this study examines role identity salience and personal networks in an offline environment, it does not address how roles impact identity salience in online environments. Therefore, this dissertation uses identity theory in a broader context to

examine the roles of fashion bloggers and how the salience of these roles influence consumer perceptions of authenticity in their identity development.

Another study by Stets and Carter (2011) employed identity theory to investigate the notion of a moral self. According to the authors, individuals strive for congruency between the meanings in perceptual input and the meanings in identity standards used to guide their behavior. When congruency exists between the meanings, it results in identity verification and the self is authenticated through the individual's output (behavior). When incongruency exists between the two, it results in identity nonverification wherein the output (behavior) has to be modified before the process can be repeated. To better understand this process, Stets and Carter (2011) examined the components that comprise a moral identity, including kindness, truthfulness, generosity, and fairness. Findings from the study reveal that an individual's moral identity is used to guide his or her behavior. This result is consistent with identity theory, which states that individuals have moral identities that range from very low to very high and these identities are verified based on their behaviors. One shortcoming of this research is that it does not address the idea of multiple identities. As such, this dissertation uses identity theory to examine the multiple identities of fashion bloggers relative to the notion of congruency.

Lastly, Stets and Cast (2007) used identity theory to explore how personal, interpersonal, and structural resources are used in social interaction to achieve self-verification. To investigate this cause-effect relationship, the authors identified the resources or "processes that are definable in sustaining a system of interaction" (Stets & Cast, 2007, p. 218), then examined the factors that influence these processes. Findings

from the study reveal that individuals who gain access to resources from a variety of sources experience greater identity verification. Furthermore, individuals who successfully authenticate their identities receive access to additional resources that help them maintain identity verification in the future. While the study is relevant to the topic of this dissertation, the authors examined a limited number of resource flows involved in the identity verification process. To address this gap, identity theory is used in this dissertation to examine how resources, and particularly those related to capital, contribute to the construction and authentication of blogger identities in the fashion blogosphere.

### **Role Identity**

Similar to identity theory, role identity is a term used to describe the connection between identity and role performance (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). While researchers have previously referenced the identity-performance dynamic, the self in these studies was investigated (1) as an outcome of some process or behavior (Olivetti, Patacchini, & Zenou, 2018; Rosenberg, 1965; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979), (2) as an agent or cause of behavior (Alexander & Knight, 1971; Backman & Secord, 1968; Jain, George, & Maltarich, 2009; Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & Casebeer, 2017; Sirgy, 1982), or (3) as a complex conceptualization (Kaplan & Garner, 2017; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Rosenberg, 1979; Schwartz & Stryker, 1970; Turner, 1968) rather than an active participant in the identity development process. Because of the diverse scope and inconsistent findings of these studies, the relationship between self-concept and role behaviors has yet to be fully addressed.

The premise of role identity is that “individuals are motivated to formulate plans and achieve levels of performance or activity that reinforce, support, and confirm their identities” (Burke & Reitzes, 1981, p. 84). That is, individuals are attracted to role-based behaviors that help them establish and authenticate a sense of self. Burke and Reitzes (1981) describe this as a two-way process, meaning individuals select certain behaviors and these behaviors, in turn, support their chosen identities. To further explain this process, the authors gathered survey data from high school and college students and assessed the link between identity and performance through relevant dimensions of meaning. For example, the authors presented the identity term ‘feminine’ and associated it with the performance term ‘tender.’ Thus, participants who identified with the term feminine acted in ways that could be interpreted as tender by others. From this quantitative assessment, the authors concluded that identity and performance are linked through common meanings.

Providing support for this process, Robinson (2007) used role identity to explore how the self is constructed in online environments. Rather than have two separate identities, Robinson (2007) explained that individuals are ‘role players,’ who choose aspects of an offline persona (i.e., appearance-related components) and incorporate them into an online persona. It is through this role-playing process that individuals strive to find an identity that meets the expectations of the audience. According to Robinson (2007), this process can be complicated given that online presentations tend to “lack the usual sensory cues;” however, other contextual clues, such as words and images, can be used to assess “the authenticity of one’s performance” (p. 948).

Observation tactics and other qualitative methods tend to be chosen over quantitative instruments in identity-related studies. Even today, the number of theoretical perspectives related to identity (symbolic interactionism, identity theory, social identity theory) far outweigh the number of quantitative instruments available to researchers. However, progress has been made toward developing tools and techniques to collect data relative to individuals' role identities (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Martin, Andrews, England, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2017). For example, Barbour and Lammers (2015) created a 44-item questionnaire to measure six aspects of professional role identity: (1) professional commitment, (2) belief in physician self-regulation, (3) belief in physician autonomy, (4) AMA membership, (5) belief in the economics of managed care, and (6) belief in managed care organizing. To develop items for the scale, the authors reviewed physician testimonials and prior literature on the topic, as well as conducted interviews with practicing physicians. Once the items were selected, physicians in three metropolitan areas were asked to respond to items, such as, *Physicians' work is something only someone trained in the field can evaluate* (belief in physician self-regulation), *Individual physicians should make their own decisions in regard to what is to be done in their work* (belief in physician autonomy), and *My practice improves when I am responsible to a health plan* (belief in managed care organizing). From this assessment, the authors concluded that belonging to a profession is not enough to determine identity structure in a work environment. Rather, the organizational structure should be considered, along with personal beliefs, when measuring professional identity.



Although advancements have been made with quantitative instruments, most of the research on identity, and role identity in particular, is still qualitative in nature. Given that the self is complex and multi-faceted, it is difficult to capture the essence of the experiences that contribute to the construction of an identity using only quantitative measures (Burke & Tully, 1977). As such, a mixed methods approach was employed in this dissertation to better understand the roles of fashion bloggers (digital consumers, stylists, consultants) and how these role-based behaviors influence consumer perceptions of authenticity. Specifically, interviews and observation tactics were used investigate the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction and to explore the role of fashion in this construction. The data collected from these qualitative methods were then used to develop and empirically test a measure of blogger authenticity from the perspective of the blog audience. This approach, discussed extensively in Chapter III, adds a new dimension to the research on identity, as it addresses the identity construction of bloggers as an understudied, yet relevant group of individuals in the fashion industry.

### **Dramaturgy**

Theatrical metaphors, such as role and performance, are commonly used in research studies to describe social interaction in everyday life (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Corrigan & Beaubien, 2013; Tilton, 2015; Whiteside & Kelly, 2016; Wilson, 2013). The most popular interpretation of these metaphors is dramaturgy – a sociological perspective developed by Erving Goffman in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on Goffman's (1959) perspective, life is similar to the theatre, where individuals assume roles as either (1) *actors* or (2) *audience members*. As *actors*, individuals spend a great

deal of time managing settings, clothing, words, and non-verbal actions to give off a particular impression. When this impression is formed in the presence of *audience members*, it is referred to as an actor's front stage behavior. Conversely, when this impression is formed in private, with only the actor present, it is referred to as an actor's back stage behavior. In most instances, actors will choose to perform a role in the presence of audience members where it is open to evaluation and criticism. As such, the appearance and manners shown on stage mimic the values and beliefs of the audience. Only in a private setting does the actor completely "relax, drop his front, forgo speaking in his lines, and step out of character" (Goffman, 1959, p. 488).

Goffman's dramaturgical approach has provided academics and practitioners with a new avenue to study consumer behavior. For example, Moisio and Arnould (2005) extended Goffman's dramaturgical approach to study consumers' shopping experiences. By closely examining three dramaturgical components – drama structure, drama interaction, and drama content – the authors captured the meaning of the environment (stage), employees (actors), shoppers (audience members), and interactions (performances) in co-constructive marketer – consumer practices. Findings from the study reveal that shoppers who actively engage with employees have more positive shopping experiences. Moreover, shoppers who interact with employees tend to have stronger, more dominant roles in shopping performances, specifically roles that orchestrate the overall shopping experience.

Corrigan and Beaubien (2013) further examined organizations in the servicescape, but in the context of an Internet presence. To evaluate the strength of an organization's

online presence, the authors recorded information from a number of Internet sources (i.e., YouTube, video presentations, discussion boards, blogs) and evaluated the instruments used for group interaction. From this evaluation, the authors noted that direct contact, symbols, gestures, facial expressions, props, sentiments, and documentation were frequently used to engage and interact online. The authors then compared this online activity to dramatic action by conducting a theatrical review that included the following: (1) situating the drama, (2) understanding the published program, (3) developing an interactive guide for action, (4) evaluating the communication used for acceptance, (5) identifying the targets and/or participants of the performance, and (6) managing the materials, audiences, and performing regions. Findings from the study suggest that Goffman's dramaturgy is useful as a contemporary research tool, but minor modifications are needed to make it applicable in an online environment. For example, Goffman (1959) describes the audience as a third party who observes the interaction on stage. In an online environment, the audience is not a silent observer; rather, the audience is often present, active, and constantly engaged with the actor. This engagement is particularly seen among members of a blogger's audience.

Some researchers have debated whether Goffman's dramaturgical approach can be used to study interaction in online social networks and virtual worlds (Arundale, 2010; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Jacobsen, 2010; Jenkins, 2010; Laughey, 2007; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Miller & Arnold, 2009; Titton, 2015). For example, Arundale (2010) contends that Goffman's work is outdated and should be remodeled to reflect advancements in research and technology. However, Miller and Arnold (2009) explain

that online interaction is a natural extension of Goffman's work, which makes it relevant to the study of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Similar to Miller and Arnold (2009), Laughey (2007), Jacobson (2010), and Jenkins (2010) note the timelessness and versatility of Goffman's dramaturgical approach and provide support for its continued use in consumer research.

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) demonstrated the timelessness and versatility of Goffman's dramaturgical approach in their analysis of identity and self-presentation in blogging and Second Life communities. Through a case study design, the authors examined ten bloggers and Second Life inhabitants, along with their online spaces, in terms of expressions given, embellishment as a form of persona adoption, dividing the self, conforming and fitting in, and masking identity. From this examination, the authors found that "participants were keen to re-create their offline self online, but engaged in editing facets of self" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 101). This finding emphasizes the premise of Goffman's work, that individuals will choose to project a given identity when front stage with an audience. Given this outcome, the authors concluded that Goffman's original framework is not only applicable to the study of online identity development, but extremely useful in understanding identity as it pertains to interaction and presentation of self in the online world.

Along the same lines, McQuarrie et al. (2013) revealed that fashion bloggers develop relationships with their audience members through the clothing items and accessories displayed on their blogs. This unconventional relationship between bloggers and audience members creates a platform where bloggers can "represent a persona that

may be far removed from their ‘real’ selves” (McQuarrie et al., 2013, p. 140), specifically a persona that can be rewritten until approval is received from the audience. Therefore, fashion bloggers, according to McQuarrie et al. (2013), are considered seasoned actors who engage in individualized authoritative performances to demonstrate their “successful enactment of style” (p. 140).

Lastly, Tutton (2015) discussed how bloggers narrate ‘fashionable personae’ through Goffman’s dramaturgical approach and Giddens’ self-reflexive identity. Defined as “something that has to be routinely created and sustained” (Giddens, 1991, p. 53), self-reflexive identity reinforces the idea that an online identity is a narrative in a perpetual state of change. For fashion bloggers, these narratives are communicated through roles and performances on their blogs and mediated by interactions with other bloggers, audience members, and the media. A compliment to Giddens’ concept, Goffman’s dramaturgical approach serves as the theoretical framework, as it explains how bloggers perform in different roles, where dress “augments the actualization of the bloggers’ fashionable personae” (Tutton, 2015, p. 207).

Although there is widespread support for Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, few researchers have employed it in their studies about online identity construction. In the small number of studies where it is employed, the research is mostly focused on organizational identity in the online servicescape (Corrigan & Beaubien, 2013). Thus, this dissertation broadens the application of Goffman’s dramaturgical approach by using it to examine individuals. More specifically, this dissertation contributes to the

understanding of Goffman's work by examining the front stage behavior of fashion bloggers and how audience members assess the authenticity of these performances.

## **Appearance**

As discussed in Chapter I, appearance is the way an individual looks or appears through gesture, location, and dress. Gesture, according to Nagels, Kircher, Steines, and Straube (2015), is a body movement or position that expresses an idea or meaning. When individuals interact with each other, body orientation and coverbal gestures are primarily used to express thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Location, the second facet of appearance, is described as the setting where an interaction takes place. Goffman (1959) describes public settings as theatrical stages that invite social interaction and private settings as spaces reserved for open and free expression. Dress, the main component of appearance in this dissertation, refers to the body modifications and supplements that an individual assembles for a particular time and place. According to Roach and Eicher (1992), the modifications and supplements that individuals display help them “interpret, utilize, and modify socially constructed meanings of dress” (p. 4).

One of the foremost researchers in the area of appearance is Gregory Stone (1962), who stated that appearance-related evaluations “contribute to the acquisition of identities and the development of a sense of self” (as cited in Roach & Eicher, 1992, p. 5). This evaluation of the self through dress is best understood through an extension of Mead's Symbolic Interactionist perspective – an evaluation process that Stone (1962) refers to as ‘Program and Review.’ According to Stone (1962) an individual creates a program through the selection and display of modifications and supplements that

communicate some aspect of his or her identity. Once this program is constructed, it is then shared with others who provide an appraisal or review of the message. When the message received by the reviewer coincides with the message shared by the presenter, the self is authenticated and this results in a successful social interaction. However, when the message received is different from the message shared, the self is invalidated and this results in an unsuccessful or failed interaction. In this case, the presenter may choose to create a new program where the process is repeated with a new set of reviewers, or to simply forgo the program altogether.

Stone's Program and Review has been used in a number of research studies, but most recently it has been employed to examine specific consumer groups. For example, Hutson (2010) examined how changes in the social landscape influence gay and lesbian individuals' appearance choices as they form, manage, and maintain their identities. Interviews conducted with twenty gay and lesbian individuals revealed that a hegemonic gay look (thinness, muscle tone, style) is needed to achieve an authentic gay identity. In other words, individuals must appear visibly gay or lesbian to be accepted as part of the surrounding community. This connection between outer appearance and self-value indicates how important societal norms are in the construction and maintenance of identities. Furthermore, this connection reinforces the idea that appearance-related evaluations are needed to successfully establish identities within a social group.

Martey and Consalvo (2011) shared similar findings in their study about avatar appearance and group identity in Second Life. According to the authors, Second Life players have freedom in the construction of their avatars, or digital representations, but

social contexts in the virtual world create boundaries and expectations that limit their options. As the authors explain,

As a virtual world, *Second Life* is comprised of multiple subcultures and communities, many of which are made distinctive via their appearance and dress. Indeed, in *Second Life*, an important part of identity formation and maintenance is conducted via appearance itself. Although residents may be able to change clothes, skin, hair, and shape at a moment's notice, most have instead established a set of visual codes that situate them as part of a particular group (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 178)

Even when players were presented with the opportunity to custom design their avatars, most chose not to due to visual codes in the virtual community. This adherence to codes and guidelines signaled to the community that players were genuinely interested in the group and wanted to be active participants in the 3D virtual world.

Similar to Martey and Consalvo (2011), Liao (2011) examined identity re/assembling through avatar creation in Second Life fashion blogging. Compared to traditional bloggers who dress and accessorize their physical bodies, Second Life fashion bloggers use avatars to display clothing and accessories on their blogs. These clothing items and accessories, which range from dresses and shoes to body shapes and eye colors, are then presented in links where community members can purchase them for their own Second Life avatars (Liao, 2011). Given that Second Life is a virtual environment that allows for different assemblages of the self, Liao (2011) states these extensive options may create “experiences of subjectivity” for fashion bloggers (p. 101). Findings from the study reveal that although every body part and attribute of an avatar can be customized in Second Life, bloggers prefer to create idealized representations of the human form that



can be adorned with modifications and supplements similar to those used in an offline environment. These small, frequent appearance changes allow bloggers to express themselves to others while adhering to expectations of the Second Life community.

Engholm and Hansen-Hansen (2014) discussed the importance of appearance changes in their analysis of Narcissus blogs. Named after the Greek mythological figure, Narcissus, who fell in love with his image, Narcissus blogs are online diaries that document bloggers' knowledge of and taste in fashion. Contrary to traditional, offline performances, the performances that take place on these blogs are reflexive, meaning bloggers document their style in the form of posts and images and audience members respond in the form of comments, questions, and suggestions. As such, the written and visual components become the program and the components read and evaluated by the audience become the review (Engholm & Hansen-Hansen, 2014).

A recent evaluation of appearance was proposed by Park and Lennon (2008). From an interpersonal attraction standpoint, the authors contend that appearance is evaluated based on two factors: (1) physical attractiveness of a target person and (2) similarities in personal characteristics between a target person and perceiver. According to Park and Lennon (2008), a target person is an individual who receives an appearance-related evaluation based on the perception of another individual. This evaluation may be positive, negative, or neutral, depending on the number of shared characteristics between the two parties. For example, a woman who is perceived as attractive will be assigned positive labels – popular, sociable, trustworthy, kind – that complement her outward appearance (Dion, Walster, & Berscheid, 1972; Eagly, Ashmore, & Makhijani, & Longo,

1991). Likewise, the individual who makes this evaluation will be assigned positive attributes due to commonalities in personality or behavioral characteristics that led to the initial attraction (Dion et al., 1972; Park & Lennon, 2008).

Yu, Damhorst, and Russell (2011) conducted a study with female college students to assess the impact that body image has on consumer perceptions of advertising images and brands. Results from a web-based survey revealed that exposure to thin models in advertisements does not elicit more favorable responses toward brands than exposure to average-sized models. However, an individual's body image indirectly influences his or her brand attitude, especially when a degree of similarity is present between the individual and the model. Findings from the study suggest that body image is an important component to understanding an individual's interpretation of media images. Moreover, body image is an evaluation tool that helps with the identification of shared characteristics and brand perception among consumers.

Although studies about appearance are diverse and spread across many disciplines, few researchers have examined the role of appearance in bloggers' identity construction and how appearance is used by blog audiences to assess the authenticity of these identities. Rather, recent literature on appearance tends to focus on avatar construction (Liao, 2011; Martey & Consalvo, 2011) and online advertising (Yu et al. 2011). In this dissertation, appearance-related evaluation processes, specifically Stone's Program and Review, is explored to define the role of modifications and supplements in the interactions between bloggers and their audience members. This examination of appearance in social interaction will provide a foundation for understanding the

relationships that bloggers form with audience members who may view them as credible and authentic. In the next section, an overview of authenticity is provided and a discussion of research studies that examine authenticity in consumption is presented. It is important to understand this notion of authenticity, specifically what it means to be authentic, because it may positively impact audience members' perceptions of fashion bloggers, help bloggers connect with these audience members, and promote engagement between bloggers and audience members via products and brands.

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity has been defined and classified in a number of ways, some of which have been contested and debated by researchers. As such, the term has been given a general meaning, sub-meanings, and meanings in context – all of which are referenced in the literature (Belk & Costa, 1998; Beverland, 2006; Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008; Cohen, 1988; Culler, 1981; Kates, 2004; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006; MacCannell, 1973). In the simplest, broadest form, authenticity refers to something [or someone] that is original, real, genuine, true, or legitimate (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Kates, 2004; MacCannell, 1973). According to Wang (1999) and others (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), this generalized definition captures the essence of authenticity, but fails to take an individual's situation or context into account.

To address this concern, the researchers proposed that authenticity be divided into two types: (1) *object authenticity* and (2) *subjective authenticity*. The meaning of *object authenticity* is similar to the general definition; an item is deemed authentic if it can be

described as original, genuine, or legitimate. The meaning of *subjective authenticity* is based on two context-dependent perspectives: (1) *constructivism* and (2) *existentialism*.

*Constructivism* positions authenticity as a socially constructed concept, meaning it emerges and evolves through interaction over time. In this case, an item does not have to be original or proprietary to be authentic; it merely has to be labeled as real or true by society. Constructive authenticity is often seen in online reviews, in which individuals evaluate their experiences with a product or service. Because these evaluations reflect different thoughts, beliefs, and backgrounds, they represent multiple realities where authenticity is determined by assessing reviews over an extended period of time (Mkono, 2012). *Existentialism*, on the other hand, positions authenticity as an individualized concept, meaning it is created by the self rather than others. In this instance, an item is considered authentic if the individual believes it to be real or true. Existential authenticity is commonly seen with tourists who actively engage in cultural practices (i.e., purchasing and wearing a distinct dress item) while visiting another country. Experiencing the world from a different perspective allows tourists to create alternative possibilities for themselves where authenticity is determined by the sense of belonging derived from engagement in the cultural practice (Wang, 1999).

Research studies about consumption often refer to authenticity as part of a phrase, such as ‘search for authenticity’ or ‘quest for authenticity’ (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Crang, 1996; Leigh et al., 2006; Peterson, 2005). Authenticity, in this context, refers to ways consumers seek “avoidance of market-constructed meanings, resistance to mass culture, and attempts to mask or disguise its influence” (Holt 1998, as cited in McQuarrie

et al., 2013, p. 152). In the next section, this definition is used to examine how authenticity plays a role in different forms of consumption.

### **Authenticity in Consumption**

Consumers seek authenticity to find meaning in their lives, specifically meaning they can relate to personal experiences or goals (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009). According to Arnould and Price (2000), this active search by consumers serves as a replacement for “the loss of traditional sources of meaning and self-identity associated with postmodern market characteristics” (p. 839). Two ways that authenticity has been used to link consumption experiences to the self is through *co-creation* and *authoritative performance* (Arnould & Price, 2000). The first of these authentication processes, *co-creation*, allows consumers to create meaning based on perceived product value. This perceived value is the result of social exchanges between consumers, where “meaning is extracted from the exchange and symbolic properties are converted into markers of collective identification” (Barthel & von Maltzahn, 2015, p. 163). The second of these processes, *authoritative performance*, allows consumers to derive meaning from cultural displays that are viewed as important representations of life (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009). In this context, cultural displays are symbols or depictions of a social unit (ethnic group) that are closely tied to the individuals as consumers.

One popular idea based on these processes is that authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation of what is observed rather than what is presented (Beverland, 2006; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Rose & Wood, 2005). In other words, authenticity is a representation of the meanings that consumers assign to an item based on their

perceptions rather than the physical properties of the item itself. Beverland and Farrelly (2009) explored this proposition through a series of in-depth interviews, which revealed that authenticity is linked to three personal goals of consumers: (1) control, (2) connection, and (3) virtue. Items that helped consumers feel in control of their lives, feel connected to their communities, and feel virtuous in their endeavors were considered part of their authentic selves. While these findings provide support for the claim that perception and meaning are used to make a determination about authenticity, fashion bloggers may have other goals and standards that structure their interpretations. Investigation into these goals, and the strategies used to achieve them, is needed to understand the role of authenticity within bloggers' identity construction.

A study conducted by Beverland et al. (2008) examined authenticity as it pertains to consumers and their perceptions of brand-related marketing. From a collection of in-depth interviews, the authors identified three forms, or interpretations of authenticity: (1) *pure (literal) authenticity*, (2) *approximate authenticity*, and (3) *moral authenticity*. *Pure authenticity* represents a commitment to tradition where items remain unchanged. Items produced with traditional equipment or served by individuals in traditional clothing are considered purely authentic because they reinforce a continuance of the historical practices familiar to the consumer (Beverland et al., 2008). For example, beer that is poured from a tap into a room temperature glass is considered purely authentic because it recreates the feeling of how beer was served in the old days. Similar to the previous form, *approximate authenticity* represents commitment to tradition, but only through symbolic or abstract impressions. Items in this category are not necessarily produced with

traditional equipment or served by individuals in traditional clothing, but they have approximate historical referents (Beverland et al., 2008). For example, a beer that is not produced or served in the traditional sense may still have approximate authenticity if the producer uses traditional product identifiers (i.e., historical images on the bottle). Lastly, *moral authenticity* represents a commitment to the unconventional, specifically something that deviates from the norm. Items crafted from inner need rather than external demand are considered morally authentic because they are produced from a genuine love of the craft. In this case, historical ties or connections to a particular time and place are considered less important than the moral values of the producer. For example, the handcrafted production of beer is viewed as morally authentic because artisans actually smell the beer and package it with their own hands rather than use a computerized process. Findings from the study reveal that consumers use these interpretations of authenticity to make purchasing decisions. Given this involvement on the part of the consumer, these findings can be used to support the claim that consumer perception is an integral component of authenticity.

In recent years, a few research studies have emerged that examine authenticity in fashion blogging. For example, Marwick (2013) conducted an ethnographic study to determine how fashion bloggers use authenticity to differentiate good fashion blogs from bad fashion blogs. According to the author, authenticity is an invaluable quality in fashion blogging, in that it describes a set of affective relations between bloggers and their audiences. In addition, fashion bloggers use their perceived authenticity as a crutch to engage with retailers and brands (Marwick, 2013). Findings from the study reveal that

authenticity is highly valued in the blogosphere, but bloggers could not clearly define what it means to be ‘authentic.’ In a similar fashion, Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) examined the role of authenticity in sponsorships when psychological closeness or parasocial interaction is present. Findings suggest that when bloggers are considered personal friends, the audience expects them to be honest and forthcoming with endorsement deals. When bloggers are insincere, it has the potential to cause irreparable damage to the relationship. Because deception is considered “morally reprehensible” (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015, p. 112), it is important that bloggers are viewed as truthful and credible when they provide recommendations.

With a similar goal in mind, Williams and Hodges (2015) conducted preliminary dissertation research on the topic and investigated the role of authenticity in the fashion blogosphere through sponsored blog posts. The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of sponsored posts on the perception of bloggers as an alternative form of marketing. To explore the topic, the authors posed the following research questions: (1) *What role do sponsored blog posts play in the fashion blogosphere?* and (2) *How do blog audience members respond to sponsored blog posts?* Through a netnographic approach, Williams and Hodges (2015) examined sponsored posts uploaded by bloggers, as well as responses from their audience members. Findings suggest that authenticity is not undermined when bloggers disclose their sponsorships in blog posts, continue to meet the needs of their audiences in spite of sponsorships, and share honest reviews about sponsored products with their audience members (Williams & Hodges, 2015).



Although the literature provides insight into what it means to have an authentic consumption experience, few studies indicate how the outcomes of these experiences impact the authenticity of individuals. As such, in the next section considerations of meaning in the virtual world are discussed. By outlining the processes used to transfer an identity from offline to online, the authenticity of an individual can be better understood.

### **Considerations of Meaning in the Virtual World**

Transitioning an identity from offline to online is a structured process that requires careful thought and consideration. Compared to an offline identity, which is shaped by a society or culture and modified by an individual, an online identity is developed by an individual and then modified by a society or culture (Lin & Yeh, 2009). This development process is similar to a ‘possible self,’ in that the focus is on a self that one would like to become or a self that one could become (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006). However, the difference lies in the mindset of the individual. An online identity co-exists with an offline identity, so it often affects an individual’s offline behavior and sense of self (Belk, 2013). With a possible self, the identity has not been realized; therefore, the individual is not concerned with what is realistic or attainable. As noted by Hoyle and Sherrill (2006), “possible selves are malleable; therefore, less stable than representations of the self-anchored in the past and present” (p. 1675). Given that this dissertation discusses fashion bloggers, a publicly recognized identity, the focus is on the creation of a digital self.

As discussed in Chapter I, Belk (2013) uses five digital modifications to describe the process of transferring an identity from offline to online: (1) *dematerialization*, (2)

*reembodiment*, (3) *sharing*, (4) *co-construction of self*, and (5) *distributed memory*. These modifications were developed to address the technological changes that an individual experiences as he or she enters the virtual world.

The first modification, *dematerialization of possessions*, refers to the liquidation and digital storage of capital goods. According to Belk (2013), when goods are transferred from offline to online, it allows individuals to document their experiences and share practical knowledge with others who belong to similar social groups.

*Reembodiment* occurs when individuals are stripped of their former bodies and provided tools to create and modify new digital selves. These tools give users “considerable leeway in their self-presentations online” (Belk, 2013, p. 481), even when the digital selves have a high degree of similarity to their physical appearances. *Sharing* is described as the exchange of information between two or more individuals. Belk (2013) states that online sharing is part of a disinhibition effect, meaning individuals find it easier to express themselves online rather than in face-to-face contexts. *Co-construction of self* results when an individual engages with others and feedback is received through emoticons, comments, and real-time interactions. As this feedback accumulates, the information initially shared by the individual becomes more of a joint expression rather than a one-sided viewpoint (Belk, 2013). Lastly, *distributed memory* refers to the archiving of memories in prosthetic technological devices (computers) and recording devices (cameras). As this archive grows over time, it becomes the individual’s primary form of autobiographical memory (Belk, 2013).

Shortly after the introduction of these modifications, Belk first focuses on disembodiment of the self in the physical world and reembodiment of the self in the virtual world. A common misconception about reembodiment is that individuals experience an immediate split between their offline and online selves when they interact with others in an online environment (Belk, 2014a). While there are distinctions between the two selves, Belk (2014a) states that “the body, in the end, centers and unites us,” meaning a digital self will never replace the physical self (p. 1111). One reason individuals feel disconnected from their physical selves in the virtual world is the difference in social interaction. As Whitehead and Wesch (2012) note,

Humans are part of much larger systems that include relationships with animals, insects, microorganisms, spirits, and people who are not always considered human by others. And as humans become more digitally connected, we must also recognize that the specialty that emerges from such connections might not always be immediately analogous to traditional social formations and may involve unhuman actors and agencies (p. 9)

Individuals who rely solely on interaction in the virtual world begin to lose sight of their physical bodies. Furthermore, individuals who become overly attached to the virtual world experience diminished humanity (Belk, 2014a). Thus, while digital possessions, virtual bodies, and online experiences have become part of everyday life, these things are not a replacement, or substitute, for possessions, bodies, and experiences in the offline world (Belk, 2014a).

Belk’s second article (2014b) focuses on online sharing and the collaborative consumption experience. Online sharing, according to Belk (2014b), is a prominent form of consumer engagement on the Internet that can be seen in many platforms ranging from

music sharing sites (iTunes, Pandora, Rhapsody, Spotify) to video sharing sites (YouTube) to photo sharing sites (Flickr) to social media websites (Facebook, Twitter) to interest sharing sites (Pinterest), as well as search engines (Google) that host an archive of shared online information and advertising sites (Craigslist, eBay) that offer goods for sale or trade. Sharing platforms like these become more than a form of online sharing when individuals decide to “coordinate the acquisition and distribution of resources for a fee or other form of compensation” (Belk, 2014b, p. 1597). In other words, an act known as ‘collaborative consumption’ occurs when a collective group purchases and distributes resources through a prior joint arrangement (i.e., splitting a pitcher of beer). Belk (2014b) states that one reason collaborative consumption has gained popularity is consumers’ need and desire for access-based consumption. That is, consumers would rather pay for temporary access to items than actually purchase and own them. The primary response to these needs and desires has been short-term rentals/shared ownership, which has facilitated the growth of an economy where individuals are no longer what they own, but what they share. The technological changes that occur in a virtual environment illustrate how complex it is to create an identity online or transfer an identity from offline to online. By examining Belk’s digital modifications in this dissertation, the transitional changes experienced by fashion bloggers can be explained and greater insight into the benefits and challenges of online identity construction can be obtained.

Watkins, Denegri-Knott, and Molesworth (2016) referenced Belk’s (2014a; 2014b) work on digital consumption in their study about the ownership and possession of digital virtual goods (DVGs). According to the authors, DVGs are meaningful extensions

of the self when they are not restricted by limited ownership. This finding is in direct contrast with Belk (2014b), who states that limited ownership releases consumers from the burdens of ownership and provides temporary fulfillment through access-based consumption. One explanation the authors use to support their argument is that some consumers may not be able to control or exploit goods fully if they are not given complete ownership over them. As such, fragmented ownership has the potential to cause problems for consumers who do not read contractual agreements or do not understand the fundamental differences between possession and ownership. This contribution to Belk's (2014a; 2014b) previous work on digital modifications raises a fundamental question in relation to this dissertation: *Do fashion bloggers understand the difference between possessing an item and owning an item?* The responses to this question may be a factor in understanding how fashion bloggers acquire products and, furthermore, how audience members assess the authenticity of bloggers' identities based on possession or ownership of these products.

As noted earlier, the literature on authenticity has described the conceptual meaning of the term, as well as what it means to have an authentic consumption experience. However, few studies have addressed what it means to be, or feel, authentic. In this dissertation, Beverland and Farrelly's definition of authenticity is used to explore the real and true in consumption experiences. In addition, Belk's digital modifications are used to examine how fashion bloggers accumulate social and cultural capital to develop online identities and how the audience perceives authenticity in this identity construction.

In the next section, the concept of capital is explained and the role it assumes in different consumer groups is discussed through studies specific to consumption.

### **Capital**

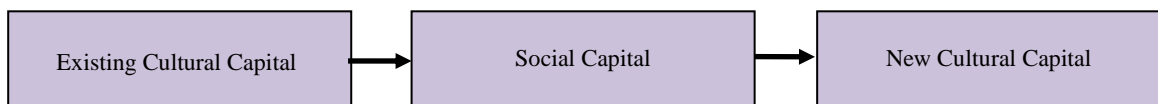
Cultural capital has been described as a conceptual tool for understanding social differentiation in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1986; Robbins, 2005). The premise is that capital dictates an individual's position in the social order, meaning individuals who secure and maintain a large amount of capital have greater mobility within social groups. While this notion of capital was initially tied to economic assets, Bourdieu (1986) extended it to include symbolic resources that bring power, prestige, and distinction, such as skills, tastes, mannerisms, and clothing. Based on this new perspective, certain forms of non-economic capital can help or hinder an individual as much as income or wealth.

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital has three distinct subtypes: (1) *embodied*, (2) *objectified*, and (3) *institutionalized*. *Embodied capital* consists of inherited and acquired properties of the mind and body that are directly influenced by an individual's surrounding culture. Language, for example, is one form of embodied capital. It can be taught to an individual, but the basis of it cannot be transmitted from one individual to another. *Objectified capital*, on the other hand, consists of material goods, such as pictures, books, cars, and clothing, that are purchased and physically or digitally shared with others. Unlike embodied capital, these goods can be transmitted from one individual to another for economic profit through the act of buying and selling. Lastly, *institutionalized capital* consists of academic credentials and qualifications, such as degrees and titles, held by individuals. Similar to embodied capital, the competence

and authority gained from this type of capital cannot be transmitted among individuals in a social group.

In some instances, the accumulation of economic and non-economic cultural capital can increase an individual's social capital or social connections. When this occurs, existing cultural capital is used as a platform to secure social capital and then social capital is re-invested to gain new forms of cultural capital. For example, individuals may use financial assets to secure social connections that can provide immediate access to a restricted product or service (Bourdieu, 2011). This restricted access is common with promotions or preview sales that require an individual to have a personal invitation to participate (Luvaas, 2013). Figure 2 illustrates the cyclical nature of this process.

*Figure 2. Cultural and Social Capital*



Adapted from: Bourdieu, P. (2011). The Forms of Capital. (1986). *Cultural theory: An anthology*, 81-93.

Much like cultural capital, social capital is divided into two subtypes: (1) *bonding* and (2) *bridging* (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2002). *Bonding* refers to the relationships that are formed between like-minded people (homogeneous groups), while *bridging* refers to the connections between people from different walks of life (heterogeneous groups). In the blogosphere, social capital is identified by mapping networks and measured by using quantitative indicators (number of visits, number of followers) and qualitative indicators (audience members' comments) that predict level of influence (Pedroni, 2015).

Understanding the different types of capital is imperative to this dissertation, as it provides a foundation for explaining how capital is accrued and shared with others. Furthermore, this basic foundation will provide insight into how bloggers use cultural and social capital to construct online identities and how these identities are reviewed and evaluated by an audience.

Holt (1998) used Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to investigate how overlapping in the purchase of goods and participation in activities across social classes impacted patterns of consumption. Findings from the study reveal that even in mass consumption practices, consumption patterns vary by cultural capital. For example, individuals with high cultural capital (HCC) are more likely to actively consume on a much broader scale than individuals with low cultural capital (LCC). Furthermore, findings indicate that those with HCC frequently interact in heterogeneous groups with consumption as the primary interactional resource. As such, the tastes of those with HCC are more diverse and they are likely to display more genres and styles than those with LCC. These findings are consistent with Bourdieu (1986), who states that individuals with more capital resources have greater position and mobility within social groups.

Pedroni (2015), McQuarrie et al. (2013), and Chittenden (2010) reference Bourdieu's theory in their studies about fashion bloggers. Pedroni (2015) used Bourdieu's theory to examine the blogosphere as a field to compete using cultural, economic, and social capital. Testimonies collected from forty in-depth interviews reveal that the blogosphere is an autonomous platform that follows three laws of functioning: (1) *struggle for legitimacy*, (2) *internal hierarchization*, and (3) *field preservation*.



*Struggle for legitimacy* refers to the tension that exists between dominant positions (i.e., high visibility, A-list fashion bloggers). *Internal hierarchization*, or ranking order relative to status, results from an uneven distribution of capital among bloggers who receive widespread approval and those who are self-proclaimed, independent bloggers. Lastly, *field preservation* is the idea that those who challenge dominant bloggers do not destroy the field but safeguard it by creating a competitive environment. According to Pedroni (2015), when the blogosphere is studied in this manner, researchers gain a better understanding of the collaborative and conflicting relationships between bloggers and how these relationships are tied to power distribution in the fashion industry. In the study by McQuarrie et al. (2013), Bourdieu's theory was used to examine the success of bloggers through public displays of taste on their blogs. Findings suggest that fashion bloggers with the most capital reap the benefits of a large audience, endorsement deals, and sponsorships. Some of these benefits include conversion of cultural capital into social and economic capital, accumulation of feedback loops (authentication) from their audiences, leverage in the fashion industry, and higher social status. In the study by Chittenden (2010), Bourdieu's theory was used to investigate the blogosphere as a space to trade cultural and social capital. Responses from a series of interviews reveal that cultural capital is displayed in the virtual space as a means of differentiation. Bloggers who successfully convey their personal style selections in a group setting are rewarded with praise and acceptance, which increases their cultural and social capital.

The bonds that form from the use or display of capital can increase social trust and make an individual appear more authentic (Leigh et al., 2006; Thornton, 1996).

Thornton (1996) illustrates this relationship between capital and authenticity in her work about youth club cultures. By employing Bourdieu's theory as a metaphor, Thornton (1996) expresses the value of a subculture to its members. Through a concept she termed 'subcultural capital,' the author suggests that members use acquired knowledge and artifacts to create hierarchies and define what is authentic (Thornton, 1996). As such, members who possess subcultural capital are seen as authentic and their positions in the status hierarchy are confirmed. This use of authenticity in a subcultural setting allows individuals to evaluate, or define, what (or who) is part or not part of the community.

In sum, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital has been used in research studies to explain social differentiation among consumer groups, including teenagers, fashion bloggers, and club cultures. The general consensus among these studies is that Bourdieu's theory is useful in explaining how and why some individuals have greater mobility within social groups. In this dissertation, the theory of cultural capital is used to explain how fashion bloggers accumulate capital and, in turn, what this capital means for their identity construction. Moreover, the theory of cultural capital is used to examine the effect of capital accumulation on bloggers' authenticity from the perspective of the blog audience.

### **Research Objectives**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, four objectives were developed to address the purpose of the study: (1) to investigate the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction, (2) to explore the role of appearance and capital in this construction, (3) to develop and empirically test a new scale for blogger authenticity, and (4) to understand how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these online personalities.

### **Objective One: The Blogosphere as a Platform**

The first objective of this dissertation is to investigate the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction. Blogs are public spaces where individuals share thoughts and express ideas with others who have similar goals, beliefs, or values (Chittenden, 2010; Rocamora, 2011). Prior research suggests that bloggers use these online platforms to engage with audience members through detailed posts and appearance-related images (McQuarrie et al., 2013). While these actions contribute to their identity development (Chittenden, 2010; Fiore, 2008; Rocamora, 2011), few studies have addressed the smaller identity-based roles (digital consumers, consultants, stylists) that fashion bloggers assume in these posts and images as part of the goal-setting and authentication process. Thus, the first research question is: (1) *How is the blogosphere used as a platform for identity construction?*

### **Objective Two: The Role of Appearance and Capital**

The second objective of this dissertation is to explore the role of appearance and capital (i.e., clothing) in the identity construction of fashion bloggers. The roles assumed by bloggers (digital consumers, consultants, stylists) and the interactions that bloggers have with audience members define their identities in the blogosphere (Chittenden, 2010; Fiore, 2008; Rocamora, 2011). Furthermore, these identities are communicated to audience members through appearance and accumulated capital on their blogs. Prior research has reinforced this idea, suggesting that online performances and appearance-related images are part of the identity construction process (Chittenden, 2010; Luvaas, 2013, Rocamora, 2011). Specifically, McQuarrie et al. (2013) state that the purpose of

blog posts and images is for bloggers to share their knowledge of, taste in, and experiences with different types of fashion. Appearance and accumulation of capital are considered part of the blogger's identity, yet few studies explain the role they play in bloggers' identity construction. Thus, the second research question is: (2) *What role does appearance and capital play in the identity construction of fashion bloggers?*

### **Objective Three: Measurement of Blogger Authenticity**

The third objective of this dissertation is to develop and empirically test a new scale for audience-perceived blogger authenticity. Research shows that authenticity is pertinent to a successful fashion blog, as it helps bloggers connect with their audience members (Marwick, 2013). Through appearance-related posts and images, fashion bloggers communicate their online personas to an audience, which helps them develop a sense of self (Chittenden, 2010; Rocamora, 2011). In prior research studies, qualitative methods have been used to capture the experiences that contribute to the construction of an online identity. Few studies have used quantitative methods due to the complexity of roles and the intricacies associated with a multi-faceted self (Burke & Tully, 1977).

### **Objective Four: Perceptions of the Blog Audience**

The fourth objective of this dissertation is to understand how blog audiences perceive authenticity in bloggers' identity construction. Fashion bloggers use their knowledge of and taste in fashion to set goals for themselves and, in turn, these goals help them accumulate cultural capital (products) and social capital (relationships). This process is evaluated by the blog audience, who provides feedback that either questions or affirms the identity of the blogger. While prior research has addressed the blog audience

and recognizes it as an integral part of bloggers' identity construction (Chittenden, 2010; Luvaas, 2013; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Rocamora, 2011), few studies have examined how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these online personalities. Thus, the third research question is: (3) *How do blog audiences perceive authenticity in bloggers' identity construction?*

Few studies address the identity construction of fashion bloggers and how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these online personalities. Given the three concepts presented in this chapter – identity, authenticity, and capital – the blogosphere is an ideal environment to explore how fashion bloggers construct, maintain, and validate their identities. For example, studies on identity describe the blogosphere as a 'stage' where bloggers can recreate and refashion themselves through roles assumed in social interactions (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; McQuarrie et al., 2013). Likewise, studies on authenticity and capital position fashion bloggers as information sources that use their knowledge of fashion to create online identities (Chittenden, 2010; Marwick, 2013). Based on the findings of these studies, this dissertation explores the relationships that fashion bloggers develop with audience members and consider what these relationships mean for their identity construction.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, an overview of the literature pertinent to the proposed dissertation was provided. Following an in-depth discussion of the literature, the research questions were presented and the research objectives were discussed in detail. In the next chapter, the methodological framework and data methods are explained.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

As discussed in Chapter I, this dissertation employed a mixed methods approach with qualitative and quantitative components. In this chapter, the methodological framework is explored through the following sections: (1) an overview of phenomenological inquiry, (2) an introduction to descriptive research, (3) discussion of data collection methods, (4) benefits of mixed methods studies, and (5) model and hypotheses development.

#### **An Overview of Phenomenological Inquiry**

The study of human phenomena based on action and behavior is best understood through an interpretive research design. With a focus on the subjective experiences of individuals, interpretive research seeks to “clarify, authenticate, or uncover” (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989, p. 41) meaning. Often, this exploration begins with a question that addresses what it is like to be or experience something, followed by an investigation of human existence and engagement relative to the inquiry. A phenomenological approach to interpretive research was used in this dissertation to explore the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction and to understand the role of appearance and capital (i.e., clothing) in this construction.

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience as it is understood and expressed in the human consciousness (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989; Merriam 1998; van Manen,

1984). The primary goal of this type of research is to transform first person accounts of the world into textual representations that aid in the understanding of a phenomenon based on content and meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hultgren & Coomer, 1989). Oftentimes, this process requires individuals to recall experiences in such a way that essential aspects are brought back in a manner similar to when they were first experienced (van Manen, 1990). These recollections allow the researcher to uncover the essence of the phenomenon and develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be or experience something in human existence.

One philosophical assumption of phenomenological inquiry is that reality is constructed when individuals interact and engage with their social environments (Merriam, 1998). As such, phenomenological researchers are primarily concerned with the meaning derived from socially constructed practices as they are perceived and communicated in the natural world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Willis, 2007). To capture these experiences, an emic perspective, or insider's point of view, is used to assess the phenomenon of interest (Bryman, 1999; Merriam, 1998). This perspective allows the researcher to investigate perceptions and categorizations of the world while serving as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998).

As an interpretive methodological approach, phenomenology does not attempt to explain or control the world. Rather, phenomenology seeks to provide insightful descriptions through an examination of individuals' "immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life" (van Manen, 1984 and 1990, p. 35). To address this objective,

researchers employ data collection methods that allow them to observe and interact directly with participants.

### **An Introduction to Descriptive Research**

Similar to interpretive research, descriptive research is used to study human phenomena. However, the focus is on situations in their current state and the goal is to identify attributes based on quantifiable observations (Williams, 2007). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2001), the purpose of this research is to “establish, confirm, or validate relationships” that can be used to develop generalizations and contribute to theory (p. 102). In this dissertation, a descriptive research design was used to collect and analyze data pertaining to bloggers’ authenticity.

Descriptive research provides a detailed account of the characteristics associated with individuals, groups, or phenomena that can be used to “discover meaning, describe what exists, determine the frequency with which something occurs, or categorize information” (Dulock, 1993, p. 154). As such, the premise of descriptive research is to understand ‘what’ rather than ‘why’ or ‘how’ a particular phenomenon happened. Because findings from descriptive studies serve as the foundation for future research, the instruments used for data collection must be valid and reliable and participants who take part in the studies must represent the target population (Dulock, 1993).

Surveys, interviews, and observation are the most commonly used data collection methods (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Nassaji, 2015). The instruments used in these methods may be standardized, meaning they have been tested and proven valid, or newly



constructed, meaning they should be pilot tested before they are employed in the study (Dulock, 1993). In the next section, the methods for data collection are described.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The purpose of data collection in this dissertation was to gain a better understanding of how fashion bloggers develop online identities and how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these identities. Two methods common to phenomenology – observation and interviews – and one method common to descriptive research – surveys – were used to collect data about the experiences and practices of individuals in the blogosphere. These methods are discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### **Netnographic Observation**

Observation is a data-gathering technique that takes place in the individual's natural setting and provides a descriptive account of practices as they are experienced (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989). The recording of these practices allows the researcher to interpret actions and behavior that “have become routine” (Merriam, 1998, p. 95), or mundane, to participants. Moreover, it permits data to be systematically recorded by the researcher as participants experience the phenomenon. Within qualitative research, these aspects of observation are considered beneficial due to the inferences that can be made based on the researcher's knowledge or expertise (Merriam, 1998).

For the purposes of this dissertation, netnographic observation was used to examine fashion bloggers and their roles and activities within the blogging community. Kozinets (2002) describes netnographic observation as a qualitative method that uses “ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are

emerging through computer-mediated communications” (p. 62). Because these cultures and communities share information publicly, observations can be recorded in a manner that is unobtrusive to members, yet descriptive to the researcher. For example, the blogosphere serves as a platform for users to discuss topics ranging from fashion to politics. The information shared on these sites is public, meaning individuals can access it anonymously or as a registered user. As such, if they choose, researchers can review content generated by users without revealing their identities or presence to the online group (Kozinets, 2002).

This new medium for social exchange has changed the way individuals interact with others in a community setting. As such, the procedures used to record these interactions have been modified to fit the structure of online environments (Kozinets, 2002). With netnographic observation, for instance, the first step in conducting research in an online setting is to select a community to examine that aligns with the purpose and objectives of the study. This task may be completed using outlets, such as online search engines, web advertisements, and word of mouth. The next step is to conduct an online search for data pertaining to the platform and community. Similar to the tools used to identify offline communities, online search engines and word of mouth may be used to gather this information. The final step is to set the criteria that will be used to evaluate the proposed group. While this can be done independently, Kozinets (2002) provides a list of five criteria commonly used in the evaluation of online communities: (1) the community is relevant to the question asked by the researcher, (2) the community has a high traffic of postings, (3) the community has a large number of discrete posters, (4) the community

has detailed or descriptively rich data, and (5) the community has between-member interactions of the type required by the research question.

Following the procedural guide provided by Kozinets (2002), the actions and behavior of four fashion bloggers were observed for a four-month period. These bloggers were selected based on their online and offline popularity, specifically taking into account the number of retail collaborations, marketing partnerships, clothing lines, and invites to fashion week they received since their blogs were created. Once these bloggers were identified, an informational search about each blogger and the blogging platform was conducted. This search included visits to the actual blog, collection of news-related articles, compilation of biographical materials, and assemblage of endorsement deals connected to the blogger.

To ensure the selected bloggers were suitable for the study, they were evaluated based on the five criteria specified by Kozinets (2002). Given the topic of this dissertation, all participants were self-identified fashion bloggers who operated a blog that had been active for the past twelve months. In addition, each blog included three or more fashion posts per week to account for a high traffic of postings and at least 200 followers who commented on a weekly basis to provide the groundwork for descriptively rich data. Lastly, each blogger engaged with the audience through initial posts, as well as the comment feature on the blog.

As an observer in this environment, two distinct types of data were collected and evaluated relative to the community: (1) data from computer-mediated communication tools and (2) data from observing the community and its members (Kozinets, 2002). The

first type of data was copied directly from the blog. Initial posts shared by the blogger, comments provided by audience members, and responses to these comments are all forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) data that were recorded. The second type of data was taken from personal observations of the blogger, audience members, and their online relationships. These observations were keywords, such as “sponsorship” or “endorsement,” that helped the blogger assign meaning to objects and experiences, and images that depicted the mood or physical setting for the blog post. Through the collection of this observation data, the foundation for the second method, in-depth interviews, was set.

## **Interviews**

According to Moustakas (1994), in-depth interviews are the primary method for collecting data in phenomenological studies. In-depth interviews are used when information sought by the researcher cannot be observed or events cannot be lived or replicated (Merriam, 1998). With a focus on the life world of the participant, the goal of a qualitative interview is to obtain descriptive accounts of experiences, feelings, or actions (Kvale, 1983; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Typically, this information is acquired through a systematic set of questions that may be presented in three interview formats: (1) *highly structured*, (2) *semi-structured*, and (3) *unstructured*. *Highly structured or standardized interviews* consist of predetermined questions that are arranged and presented in a specific order to participants (Merriam, 1998). Due to the rigid format and strict adherence to a preset inquiry, the responses to these questions may or may not represent the participant’s point of view. As a result, structured interviews are rarely used within

the realm of qualitative research except to gather sociodemographic data (i.e., age, income, education, marital status). *Semi-structured interviews* are far more common, as they allow for exploration of the topic from the worldview of the participant (Merriam, 1998). Through flexibly worded questions, participants are encouraged to share their unique perspectives and understandings of the phenomenon under investigation. Lastly, *unstructured or informal interviews* are helpful when the researcher is investigating a phenomenon that is not well understood (Merriam, 1998). Questions are formulated throughout the interview process as relevant information about the topic is obtained. Although semi-structured interviews are the preferred method in qualitative research, all three interview types serve a purpose. Thus, it is not uncommon for researchers to combine the types throughout the process to obtain the information needed for analysis.

One factor that impacts interview structure is the type of questions asked and how they are posed to the participant. According to Merriam (1998), four distinct categories of questions have been identified and used in qualitative research: (1) *hypothetical*, (2) *devil's advocate*, (3) *ideal position*, and (4) *interpretive*. *Hypothetical questions* create scenarios where the participant is asked to describe what he or she might do in a particular situation (Merriam, 1998). Oftentimes, these questions elicit responses that represent the participant's actual experience. *Devil's advocate questions* challenge the participant to think about situations from a different perspective by presenting them in an opposing manner (Merriam, 1998). By depersonalizing sensitive or controversial issues, the researcher makes the participant feel more comfortable about sharing his or her opinion on the matter (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). *Ideal position questions* ask the participant

to describe an optimal situation related to the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1998). Posing questions in this way helps researchers understand the positives and negatives associated with a situation. Finally, *interpretive questions* affirm what the participant stated in his or her previous response. When uncertainty arises in guided conversation, researchers ask interpretive questions to clarify preceding thoughts or opinions.

For this dissertation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four fashion bloggers. Each interview was audio-recorded with permission from the participant. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), record keeping in this manner allows the researcher to hold on to the data in an “accurate and retrievable form until it can be transcribed at a later date” (p. 126). In addition, all participants were 18 years of age or older and willing to respond to questions that corresponded to their role as a personal fashion blogger (Appendix A).

Fashion bloggers were asked to participate in a total of two to three interviews, with each session lasting approximately one to two hours. The initial interview started with descriptive questions, such as, *How and when did you start your blog? How much of your time is spent blogging? How do you manage this time to run your blog efficiently? Do you have staff members that help you?* These questions were used to acclimate bloggers to the interview process before presenting more difficult, open-ended questions in subsequent interviews, such as, *How do you capture the attention of your audience? How do you keep them engaged?* These questions were imperative to the study, as they centered on the constructed relationships of bloggers and their audience members. Finally, bloggers were asked questions, such as, *What advice would you give to a new*

*blogger? What do you wish you could go back and tell yourself at the beginning of your blogging journey?* These questions provided a pathway for bloggers to reflect on their overall experiences and share lingering thoughts about their identities in the blogosphere.

The last section of the interview with each fashion blogger focused on his or her role as an audience member rather than owner of a blog. As audience members, these bloggers were asked to answer general questions about the blogging community, such as, *How many blogs do you follow? What are your main considerations when selecting a blog to follow?* These questions were followed by hypothetical and ideal questions that compared the blog to other fashion blogs, such as, *If a fashion blogger copied an outfit from your blog and displayed it on his or her blog the next day, what would you do? Would you address the issue? If so, how?* Making this comparison provided greater insight into the fashion blogging community and illustrated how bloggers relate to others when taking on a different role.

Prior to conducting these interviews, participants were informed of the purpose and objectives of the study, advised how their participation will add value to the research, and asked to sign a consent form that outlined these terms (Appendix B). All interviews were conducted via Skype or FaceTime, as the participants lived outside of the researcher's geographic area.

After the qualitative data collection phase was complete, Spiggle's (1994) recommendations for analysis and interpretation were employed. Analysis involved the organization and classification of data through seven manipulation operations: (1) *categorization* (labeling of data through codes), (2) *abstraction* (placing categories of

data into broader groups), (3) *comparison* (examining similarities and differences across data), (4) *dimensionalization* (identifying attributes and characteristics across dimensions), (5) *integration* (mapping relationships between concepts), (6) *iteration* (moving back and forth between stages), and (7) *refutation* (exposing defined categories to empirical scrutiny). Interpretation used the abstract conceptualizations drawn from this analysis to construct and derive meaning.

To start this process, the interviews were transcribed and compiled with the two types of netnographic observation data: (1) computer-mediated communications of online community members and (2) reflective observations about the community and its members. Once this was completed, the data were reviewed and categorized based on identifiable patterns and experiences. Next, the similarities and differences of these categories were compared to derive a set of themes. These thematic constructions were further established through characteristics and attributes across dimensions. From this process, an initial interpretation was constructed and shared with the bloggers. This member check allowed participants to make an assessment regarding the accuracy of the interpretation and identify areas that needed further evaluation or subsequent change (Creswell, 1994). Finally, these themes were used to develop items for a new blogger authenticity scale, which was tested with a survey instrument.

### **Scale Development**

Churchill's (1979) procedure for developing multi-item measures was followed to establish an appropriate measure of authenticity. The suggested procedure includes a sequence of eight steps: (1) *specify the domain of the construct*, (2) *generate a sample of*



*items*, (3) *collect data*, (4) *purify the measure*, (5) *collect data*, (6) *assess reliability*, (7) *assess validity*, and (8) *develop norms*.

In the first step, *specify the domain of the construct*, the construct is defined and explained. This part of the process helps the researcher determine how the construct should be measured and what the construct should measure. The next step, *generate a sample of items*, is focused on the creation of items that capture the meaning of the construct, as specified in the definition. For the purposes of this dissertation, online observations and in-depth interviews conducted with fashion bloggers were used to develop the items. This exploratory technique was supplemented by literature on authenticity that indicates how the construct has been defined in other contexts.

Once the item pool was created, the items were assessed by the dissertation committee (face validity), and approval was received from the Institutional Review Board (Appendix C), the next step was to *collect data* from participants. To refine the items and purify the measure in the pre-test, data were collected from 638 participants using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). All participants who took part in the survey were at least 18 years of age and resided in the United States. Moreover, the participants had completed at least 100 human intelligence tasks (HITs) with an approval rate of 95% or higher, meaning 95% of their prior tasks had been accepted by the requestor. According to Peer, Vosgerau, and Acquisti (2014), worker reputation of 95% and above is considered a sufficient condition for obtaining high quality data on MTurk. In addition to these parameters, two screening questions were included in the description of the survey: (1) *Have you ever visited the blog of a fashion blogger/influencer?* and (2) *Have you*

*followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer for at least six months?* Participants who responded “no” to either of these questions were immediately taken to the end of the survey. Participants who completed the survey within the one-hour time frame received \$.50 as compensation for participation. This money was deposited into their Amazon.com account.

In recent years, crowdsourcing websites, such as MTurk, have become a popular means of collecting data. While MTurk participants may be considered less desirable for complex research topics, research shows that “MTurk samples are not necessarily worse than other samples for some purposes and may in fact be more representative of the general population” (Hulland, Baumgartner, & Smith, 2018, p. 95). For this dissertation, MTurk was an appropriate means of collecting data, as it provided access to a broad and diverse population. Because the fashion industry is “no longer tied exclusively to major cosmopolitan cities like New York, Paris, and Milan” (Detterbeck, LaMoreaux, & Sciangula, 2014, p. 349) and the meaning of “fashion expert” has changed, demographic parameters were not set for participants in the study. However, the following demographic information was collected: (1) gender, (2) age, (3) ethnicity, (4) marital status, (5) education level, (6) employment status, and (7) household income.

A split sample approach was used to conduct an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) - statistical techniques used in structural equation modeling. The purpose of an EFA is to determine the number of dimensions that comprise each construct while the purpose of a CFA is to test how well items represent the constructs identified in the EFA (Marsh, Morin, Parker, and Kaur, 2014). Once the

authenticity measure was *purified* with an EFA, a CFA was conducted to assess reliability and validity. To *assess reliability* of the scale, composite reliability was calculated in conjunction with structural equation modeling. To *assess validity* of the scale, two types, convergent and discriminant, were examined.

Once the pre-test was completed, items that comprised the new authenticity scale were placed in a survey with other related constructs, including blogger responsiveness and number of sponsorships, to assess consumers' involvement with fashion blogs (Appendix E). Data were collected from 499 participants using the same parameters and screening questions as the pre-test. As mentioned earlier, participants who did not qualify for the study were taken to the end of the survey without compensation. Participants who completed the survey received \$.80 as compensation for participation.

While a diverse sample was appropriate for this study, it does have limitations. One limitation is that the population does not represent one group or classification. Rather, the population represents individuals who have different opinions, ideas, and perspectives. As such, this sample may not be ideal for making generalizations about a particular demographic group. Another limitation is the use of MTurk participants. While this sample was representative of the general population (Hulland et al., 2018), some participants may not have spent an adequate amount of time on the survey or misread the questions. Attention-related issues could cause the results to be skewed and limit generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the data collected from MTurk participants resulted in the development of a new scale that can be used to assess blogger

authenticity. Lastly, Churchill (1979) recommends that the researcher *develop norms*, or draw conclusions, using the mean and standard deviation.

## **Surveys**

Surveys are widely used among academics and practitioners in applied social research (Hulland et al., 2018; Kelley, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003). Considered a “systematic, representative sampling method” (Krosnick, 1999, p. 537), surveys allow the researcher to collect information from a relatively large sample of participants. This data, in turn, is used by the researcher to make inferences or generalizations about the wider population (Kelley et al., 2003).

To design an effective survey, the researcher must make two sets of decisions. Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, and Tourangeau (2009) describe these decisions as (1) *representation* and (2) *measurement*. With *representation*, the researcher decides on an object of measurement, meaning who the survey describes and who will provide the desired data. Typically, the object of measurement is an individual (i.e., consumer, blogger) or an organization (Hulland et al., 2018). If an individual is the object of measurement, the information tends to be self-reported, although information may be shared by those who observe the individual. With *measurement*, the researcher must decide what the survey will measure and which items will yield responses that reflect the measure. In the case of new instruments, the design process is controlled by the researcher (Hulland et al., 2018). Thus, it is important that the researcher is aware of potential errors and takes steps to minimize them. For example, the use of multi-item (MI) scales is standard practice in academia, particularly in business disciplines, as they

tend to outperform single-item (SI) scales of the same construct (Diamantopoulos, Sarstedt, Fuchs, Wilczynski, & Kaiser, 2012). Additionally, MI scales increase the likelihood that the content validity, construct reliability, and convergent validity will reach acceptable levels (Hinkin, 1995; Nunnally, 1978). For the purposes of this dissertation, surveys with MI scales were used to collect data from the blog audience, as it allowed the researcher to “assess preferences, practices, characteristics, commonalities, and differences” (Dulock, 1993, p. 155) among participants (Appendix D and E).

### **Benefits of Mixed Methods Studies**

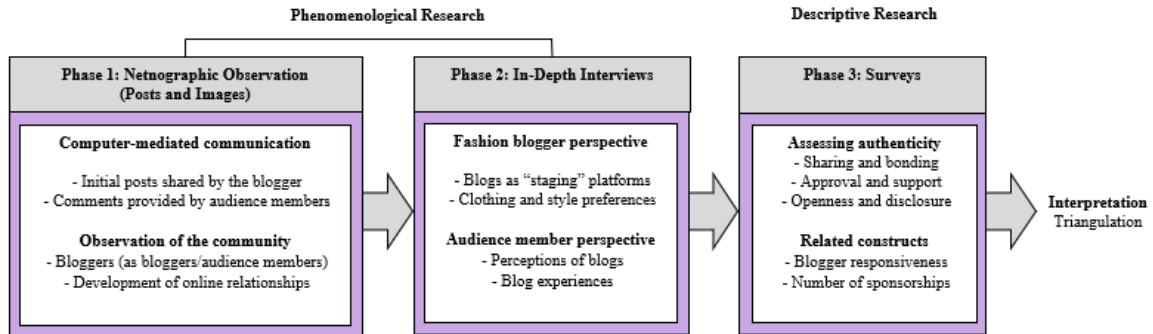
Mixed methods research is a popular and effective way to study complex research topics. Typically, these studies involve the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods at different stages of the research process, including (1) development of research questions/objectives, (2) selection of research design, (3) procedures used to collect data, and (4) approaches to analyzing and interpreting data (Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004; Pluye & Hong, 2014). By integrating methods, researchers adopt a new mode of thinking that transcends the idea that qualitative and quantitative methods are epistemologically incompatible (Sieber, 1973). In fact, it encourages researchers to “reject the idea that epistemological paradigms lead to particular methodological techniques” (Small, 2011, p. 61).

Contributing to the mixed methods approach, Brewer and Hunter (1989) proposed a multi-method strategy with triangulation as the primary objective. According to the authors, some of the best works in sociology had been based on “multiple and diverse sources of data that could and should inform all stages of the research process” (Small,

2011, p. 61). Today, this strategic approach is used by contemporary scholars who engage in mixed methods research. While there have been documented challenges, such as incompatibility of paradigms and the appropriate use of a qualitative-quantitative contrast in research practices (Greene, 2007; Onwuegbuzie, Johnson & Collins, 2009), many researchers believe that mixed methods is a new perspective – a new approach – that is useful, effective, and innovative (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Small 2011).

In mixed methods studies, it is not uncommon for researchers to engage in complex research designs and collect different types of data (Small, 2011). When researchers have different data sets, they can use the findings from one type of data to confirm the findings of another type of data (triangulation). This design, known as confirmation, is effective when researchers want to ensure that the findings of a phenomenon are not impacted by the type of data collected (Small, 2011). Another benefit of diverse data sets is that one type of data can be used to compensate for the weakness of another type of data (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). This design, known as complementarity, is used when researchers do not want to limit the scope of knowledge (Small, 2011). In this dissertation, a confirmatory design was used to understand how fashion bloggers use their appearance to construct online identities and how blog audiences assess the authenticity of these identities. Figure 3 outlines this process.

Figure 3. Data Collection Process



First, netnographic observation was employed to gain a better understanding of the interactions that take place on blogs. Examining posts and comments provided insight into the relationships that develop between bloggers and their audience members. Next, in-depth interviews were conducted with fashion bloggers from two perspectives. The first interview focused on their role as a blogger while subsequent interviews focused on their role as an audience member. Themes that emerged from the interview data were then used to create items for a blogger authenticity scale. Lastly, a survey that included the blogger authenticity scale and two related constructs – blogger responsiveness and number of sponsorships - was distributed to blog audience members (Appendix E). This data was used to confirm that the scale was an appropriate measure of blogger authenticity.

### Model and Hypotheses Development

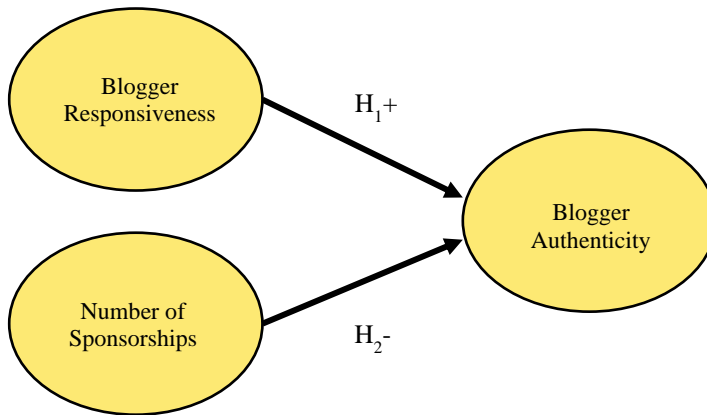
As discussed earlier in the chapter, a descriptive research design was used to assess blogger authenticity from the perspective of the blog audience. Figure 4 illustrates the three constructs – blogger responsiveness, number of sponsorships, and authenticity –

that were tested using multiple regression and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The first construct, blogger responsiveness, was derived from Hahn and Lee's (2014) examination of consumer attitudes toward fashion blogs. According to the authors, consumers who feel they have a close relationship with the blogger, through one-way or two-way interactions, will consider the blogger a friend. To measure the construct, a semantic differential scale was developed from Kent and Taylor's (1998) five principles for building dialogic relationships. Four sets of bipolar adjectives that addressed the responsiveness of the blogger were included in the scale: (1) unresponsive – responsive, (2) not willing to reply – willing to reply, (3) not interactive – interactive, and (4) does not answer comments – answers comments. The second construct, number of sponsorships, was derived from Williams and Hodges' (2015) study of sponsored posts in the fashion blogosphere. Findings suggest that when every post is sponsored, it can make the blogger appear inauthentic. To measure the construct, a semantic differential scale was developed from Tripodi, Hirons, Bednall, and Sutherland's (2003) 'communication effects' method. Three sets of bipolar adjectives that addressed the number of sponsorships promoted by the blogger were included in the scale: (1) a little – a lot, (2) few – many, and (3) not many – very many. Prior to responding to these items, participants were prompted with a question and statement pertaining to sponsorship: (1) *Are you aware of any companies or brands that your favorite fashion blogger/influencer has sponsored?* and (2) *Describe the last sponsorship of your favorite fashion blogger/influencer. If you are not aware of a sponsorship, put N/A.* The purpose of these questions was to show that participants understood the meaning of the term,



“sponsorship,” and could provide an example of a brand sponsored by his or her favorite blogger. The third construct, blogger authenticity, was derived from the existing literature on authenticity (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Marwick, 2013; Williams & Hodges, 2015), as well as the structure of the qualitative interviews. Based on the outcomes of these studies, it is expected that blogger responsiveness will be positively related and number of sponsorships will be negatively related to authenticity.

*Figure 4. Blogger Authenticity Model*



### **Blogger Responsiveness and Blogger Authenticity**

Research shows that media personalities have one-sided and two-sided relationships with their audience members (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Hahn & Lee, 2014). With one-sided relationships, known as parasocial interaction, audience members engage with fashion bloggers in the form of comments and questions, but do not receive a response (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011). Although these one-way conversations are not directly acknowledged by the blogger, audience members are deceived, by their own volition, that these relationships are two-sided (Colliander &

Dahlen, 2011). The illusion of a reciprocal relationship grows with subsequent interactions, even when the blogger's behavior does not change (Labrecque, 2014).

While the illusion of friendship is present in one-sided relationships, the foundation is not based on something real or true. It is based on superficial conditioning practices, such as repeated exposure to blog content (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011) and preoccupation with the blogger's appearance (Hahn & Lee, 2014). With two-sided relationships, known as psychological closeness, fashion bloggers respond to comments and questions posed by audience members. This engagement leads to increased bonding and intimacy, which fosters the perception of trust (Halvorsen et al., 2013) and authenticity (Marwick, 2013). Moreover, prior research indicates that the authenticity of objects or experiences is evaluated based on whether the object or experience is real or appears to be real (Becker, Wiegand, Reinartz, 2019). As such, when audience members receive a response from the blogger, or someone who is believed to be the blogger, the interaction is perceived as real, which makes the blogger appear more authentic.

H<sub>1</sub>: Blogger responsiveness has a significant positive relationship with blogger authenticity

### **Number of Sponsorships and Blogger Authenticity**

With the proliferation of social media, it is easy for individuals to share their personal lives online (Chittenden 2010; Rocamora, 2011). In fact, it has become commonplace for individuals to connect with each other, as well as companies and brands (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). In the case of fashion bloggers, this simple connection with brands extends beyond the occasional like or comment. The

blogger becomes a partner who receives a form of compensation (i.e., money, free products, trips) in exchange for posts that endorse a good or service (Williams & Hodges, 2015). According to Lueck (2015), these posts, known as sponsored blog posts, have become natural, believable, and part of bloggers' daily lives.

Consumers view social media celebrities as authentic customers who like the products they display and endorse (Lueck, 2015). The belief that bloggers are 'authentic customers' suggests that consumer perception may change as the number of sponsorships increases. In a study conducted by Williams and Hodges (2015), findings reveal that a large number of sponsorships can cause the blogger to be viewed as less authentic. Based on this finding and the supporting literature, it is likely that bloggers with a greater number of sponsorships will be seen as less authentic than bloggers with fewer sponsorships.

H<sub>2</sub>: Number of sponsorships has a negative relationship with blogger authenticity

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the methodological framework used to address the purpose of the study was explained. Additionally, an overview of phenomenological inquiry and an introduction to descriptive research was presented to illustrate the appropriateness of a mixed methods approach for this dissertation. Within this framework, the specific data collection methods were described, benefits of mixed methods studies were presented, and the model and hypotheses were discussed.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

In this chapter, rationale for using qualitative methods to inform quantitative studies is presented, themes that emerged from the interview data are described, and the scale development process is explained. Specifically, the first section describes how and why qualitative data is used to develop quantitative instruments. The second section provides a detailed description of the bloggers who participated in the study. The third section outlines the themes relative to participants' perspectives of and interactions with the blogging community. The fourth section describes Churchill's (1979) procedure for developing measures and explains how it was used to create and select items for the authenticity scale. The last section discusses the relationships that two constructs – blogger responsiveness and number of sponsorships – have with blogger authenticity.

#### **Qualitative Interviews to Inform Quantitative Research**

Over the years, qualitative methods have been used to inform the design and use of quantitative instruments (Davis, Golicic, & Boerstler, 2011; Padgett, 1998). With this mixed methods approach, researchers collect data from a small group of participants and then use this data to design quantitative tools for larger samples (Rowan & Wulff, 2007). This process is needed when existing instruments are unable to accurately measure the construct. According to Rowan and Wulff (2007), the development and use of new

quantitative instruments can enhance the quality and value of the research, especially when existing instruments have a narrow focus.

In the case of fashion bloggers, a new instrument is needed to assess the authenticity of their online identities. While prior research has examined online identity development (Bartle, 2004; Belk, 2013; Taylor et al., 2012) and authenticity in consumption (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Crang, 1996; Leigh et al., 2006; Peterson, 2005), it has not addressed the two-fold purpose of this dissertation: (1) to explore how fashion bloggers use appearance-related components, including capital, to create online identities and (2) to understand how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these identities. To address these gaps, interviews were conducted with four fashion bloggers and themes that emerged from these interviews were used to develop items for a new blogger authenticity scale. According to Padgett (1998), qualitative inquiry is an integral part of this process, as it allows researchers to “explore concepts and identify hypotheses” based on real life experiences and situations (p. 451). The items, once identified, were purified and then assessed using reliability and validity measures. Lastly, when the scale was validated, it was used to collect data from the blog audience. The next section describes this process in detail, starting with a description of the participants and themes that emerged from the interviews.

### **Description of Participants**

Initially, interviews were conducted with five fashion bloggers. Shortly after the interviews concluded, one participant withdrew from the study and requested that her information be discarded. Because the participant had shared her name and personal

details of her life, the interview data were considered identifiable. To appropriately dispose of the data, three interviews were deleted from the audio-recorder, as well as a password-protected computer.

As specified in Chapter III, all participants were over the age of 18 and had managed their blogs for at least one year. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants, including their ages, state of residence, and number of blog followers. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to protect her confidentiality.

*Table 1. Interview Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>State of Residence</b>	<b>Number of Followers</b>
Abigail	28	North Carolina	15,600
Emily	27	Tennessee	11,900
Grace	30	Ohio	20,900
Olivia	27	California	13,200

### **Abigail**

Abigail, a native of North Carolina, developed an interest in fashion and style blogs when she transitioned from college student to young professional. As an undergraduate student, Abigail wore clothing that she perceived as comfortable. T-shirts and jeans were staples in her wardrobe. Abigail's perception changed when she accepted a job in an office setting. She started conducting 'how to' searches, which helped her form a style of her own. Abigail recalled,

It probably wasn't until I had been working in an office for a while that I even started reading blogs. I would do little searches like, how to wear ankle boots or how to wear capri pants, or whatever it was that I was seeing as a trend.

In 2011, Abigail started a blog to document her personal journey with wedding planning. Over time, the focus shifted from planning to life and style, which is what she documents and shares with her 15,600 followers.

### **Emily**

As a young child, Emily did not have access to many resources. The closest mall was 45 minutes away and online shopping was not an option for her at the time. The only way Emily could purchase name-brand items, such as Gap and Abercrombie, was through local thrift stores.

I was in a town of 10,000 people from birth to age 18. A fairly small mall was 45 minutes away and the closest good-sized mall was about two hours away. Having access to name brand... really the only place you could get those was at thrift stores because online shopping wasn't what it is today.

Years later, Emily moved to Tennessee to start her professional law career. As an attorney, Emily's life was ordered and structured, so she developed a fashion blog to tap into her creative side. Over the past four years, Emily has gained 11,900 followers. Now, she collaborates with local thrift stores to change the perception that secondhand shopping is for the less fortunate.

### **Grace**

Before she moved to Ohio, Grace was a resident of New York. She relocated there to become a ballerina, but quickly developed a love for fashion. To share her life and interests, Grace created a blog that focused on the use of fashion in large scale events. Slowly, the topic transitioned to wedding style and, eventually, personal style.

Grace shared,

With the blog, it started as a way to keep family and friends updated on what I was doing in New York and it just naturally evolved. Initially, I did a wide frame of content on random fashion things. I would recap fashion from the New York City Ballet Gala because I went to New York to be in ballet. I did some content on styling for a wedding because I was getting married and then I narrowed it down to just my personal style.

A proponent of affordable fashion, Grace believes that “mixing and matching high end and low end makes fashion accessible and helps [women] build a wardrobe that’s very moldable.” In 2015, Grace redefined the goals of her blog, focusing primarily on personal style and how she could use it to help her 20,900 followers build a classic wardrobe.

### **Olivia**

For Olivia, a stay-at-home mom, blogging became a passion her senior year of college. While she had always been interested in fashion, Olivia felt a strong connection when a fellow classmate started a style and beauty blog. From that moment, Olivia knew she wanted to develop a blog to share her life and personal style. She explained,

For some reason, it was hers. I had seen others, but it didn’t really spark anything in me. When I saw hers, I was like, I want to do that. So, I emailed her and got advice. It was her blog that I loved.

Shortly after the birth of her daughter, Olivia asked her husband to build a website. Since 2013, she has accumulated 13,200 followers for her Mormon-based lifestyle blog. In the next section, themes that emerged from analysis of the data are explained.



## **Themes**

Fashion bloggers create online identities by sharing content and photographs on digital platforms (Chittenden, 2010). While appearance-related components were part of each participant's blog, the road to self-discovery was based on a larger purpose, mission, or goal. The factors that led to the achievement of these goals are described through three themes: (1) cognitive intimacy, (2) affirmation, and (3) transparency.

### **Cognitive Intimacy**

Cognitive intimacy refers to the sharing of thoughts or ideas in a way that bonds individuals or groups (Maister & Tsakiris, 2016). For participants in this study, inspiration played an important role in the creation of their identities and how these identities were shared with an audience. More specifically, the personal style choices made by bloggers were used as a communication tool to engage with audience members. These two methods of bonding are discussed in the following sections through two sub-themes: (1) the desire to inspire and (2) knowledge of and taste in fashion.

#### ***The Desire to Inspire***

All four participants indicated that their purpose for creating a blog was to inspire others. Each participant described how she sourced inspiration from some aspect of her life, then communicated that inspiration through her appearance. For example, Olivia described her personal style as a Mormon blogger as "modest," which is a message she hopes will resonate with her daughters.

I have a really high standard of modesty. I'm going to be raising two daughters and I want them to know that they can love fashion and they don't have to feel like they're out of the loop because they choose to be modest.

While Olivia is respectful of others and their fashion choices, the goal of her blog is to communicate modesty through personal style. Respect and appreciation for her body is important to Olivia as an individual, a mother, and a member of the Mormon community.

Extending beyond the boundaries of personal style, Emily shared her passion for thrift shopping and explained why it became the primary inspiration for her blog. When she purchases items secondhand, Emily “makes a conscious decision to reuse something that someone has already used,” which she believes “continues the story of a piece.” This reduce, reuse, recycle approach is apparent in her description of vintage purchases she has made in the past.

When I buy really old vintage stuff, I like to imagine that it had this extravagant life before me, like Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants... or maybe some famous country music star owned this or played at the Opry in this dress. Things are going to end up in a landfill if nobody buys them. So, it's just reuse and be conscious about what you are purchasing.

Emily brings new life to secondhand items by envisioning their purpose or narrative. She builds on that story by displaying the items on her blog and discussing them with audience members. Moreover, she inspires her audience to thrift shop when she shows that high-end ensembles can be recreated at affordable prices.

I think people can see themselves in me. Some of the other bloggers that I read... I could never afford those Gucci flats. I could never afford that Celine handbag. There's always going to be somebody with something better, so I think I maybe take that element out so it's more like... I can do that. I can go to Goodwill and find a dress for under \$10. I can find something that looks like that.

The purpose of Emily's blog is to show her audience that thrifting or buying secondhand can be thrilling and imaginative. It provides access to name brands that may not be available in certain locations and allows individuals to recreate expensive looks on a budget. While this love for thrifting started for Emily as a child, it is a passion she has carried with her into adulthood.

Inspiration, while a primary motivator, can have a negative effect on bloggers, especially when they feel that some aspect of their blog is not comparable. When Abigail first started blogging, she was content with the clothing in her closet. She felt comfortable starting a blog with outfits she had accumulated over the years. Then, as she read other blogs, she felt pressured to emulate other bloggers. As Abigail explained,

I noticed when I first started blogging about fashion and style, I liked my clothes. I put together cute stuff, but the more I was reading other blogs, I got this sense of 'Keeping up with the Joneses.' I spent way too much money on clothes that I would not have bought otherwise because they weren't really my style. I was just doing it to keep up with the other bloggers because I thought it would make me successful.

Shortly after, Abigail realized she was not being true to herself and decided to take a break from blogging. She removed the previous purchases from her closet, which helped her shift focus and find new purpose.

I ended up taking a break from blogging for a while and purged my closet. Now, I'm just here because I want to put my stuff out there and I want people to like it. If they don't, that's okay. I also hope it inspires them in some way, whether it's buying new pieces of clothing or finding a new way to style pieces they already have or going out and making a resolution. In some way, I hope it has inspired them to do something.

Grace shared a similar thought regarding her clothing selections. Rather than make an impulse purchase and only wear the item once, Grace “selects with intention.” As she noted in the interview,

I don’t buy on a whim because you get a closet full of crap that you don’t wear and that defeats the purpose of building a wardrobe. I don’t buy it unless I can wear it multiple times or pick it unless it warrants repeat wear.

When asked to provide an example, Grace described a pair of earrings that she displayed on the blog multiple times within a one to two-month period. The frequent rotation of these earrings in Grace’s wardrobe showed her audience that she is ‘just like any other girl,’ meaning she invests time and money into items that can be worn more than once.

I probably wore those [earrings] for weeks at a time. When I get something that I’m really excited to add to my closet, I wear it until I’m sick of it and I don’t change that just because I’m a style influencer. I think people need to see that practical side of fashion rather than a newly curated outfit every day. That’s not most people’s reality.

According to Grace, this notion of repeating outfits and ensembles is a reality for those who follow fashion blogs. As such, she makes a conscious effort to communicate with her audience members within this reality. The emphasis that Grace places on the practical side of fashion has helped her bond with her audience in a meaningful way.

### ***Knowledge of and Taste in Fashion***

During the interviews, participants referred to blogging as a ‘hobby’ or ‘leisure activity.’ Moreover, their blogs were referred to as ‘personal style blogs,’ meaning knowledge of and taste in fashion was based on personal preference rather than an

established set of rules. For example, Olivia and Grace preferred classic, edgy pieces that they could mix and match to create different ensembles. As Grace noted,

I would say that my personal style is overall classic with random pops of color. I believe in a classic wardrobe because no one realistically is going to go and shop every day or every time something new happens. You're not going to be able to afford it, so I like to differentiate my style with pops of color. Overall, I call it classically edgy.

As a follow up, Grace was asked which retailers offered the classic, edgy pieces. She replied,

I do a lot of shopping at Madewell. That is my number one store – ‘my jam’ so to speak. I also really love J. Crew, which totally makes sense because they are a sister company. As far as the edgy factor, I really love Nordstrom. Nordstrom has a variety of brands that carry really edgy pieces.

The retailers that Grace identified as “classic” or “edgy” are important to her identity development. Selecting pieces that correspond with her blogger identity creates consistency for audience members who may want to put together a similar look. Furthermore, her disclosure of retailers provides an outlet for those who may not know where to shop to recreate her ensemble.

Conversely, Emily did not purchase or wear a particular style of clothing. Her style “ebbed and flowed” with what she was experiencing in life at the time. As a college student, Emily wanted to purchase expensive items to fit in with the girls at school. However, once she started law school and secured a job of her own, her perception of clothing and style changed.

In college, I wanted the nicest everything. I wanted to go to boutiques and buy \$500 dresses because that's what all the other girls were wearing at formal. Then, I got out of college and went to law school and got a job and started paying for everything myself. I was like, What am I doing? I am that real girl who was in the thrift store.

This realization helped Emily rediscover her love for thrift shopping. Rather than purchase and display expensive items on her blog, Emily wanted to show a real and true representation of her life through emotion-based style choices. She explained, "I just try to display whatever emotions I'm feeling or what I'm going through in my life through my style... to be a walking billboard of who I am as a person." When Emily uploads images to her blog, she is communicating her knowledge of and taste in fashion. Given that these images represent different emotions she has experienced, Emily's online identity is more than just clothing selections. It is the expression that occurs through her clothing that allows her audience to connect with her on a deeper level.

While Emily communicates through emotions and experiences, Abigail defines her style through age-appropriate clothing. For example, when Abigail accepted a position as a grant writer after graduate school, she purchased clothing items that were considered 'business professional.' Among these items were knee-length pencil skirts and blazers, which marked her transition from graduate student to young professional. When asked how she communicates her knowledge of and taste in fashion through her blog, Abigail replied,

Part of my philosophy for my blog is wear what makes you comfortable. Wear what you like, but I also don't want to dress... I make it a point not to dress in the junior department at Target because I'm afraid it will make me look younger than I already do.

Abigail encourages her audience members to experiment with fashion based on personal preference, but she also believes in dressing in an age-appropriate manner. To communicate this belief to her audience, she uses her blog as a platform to discuss clothing options that could be worn to the office, an event, or a family gathering. This context-based approach, where specific fashion items are displayed and the audience approves or disapproves, is commonly used by bloggers.

### **Affirmation**

Affirmation refers to approval or support that is given to someone or something when it is perceived as socially acceptable (Haggard & Williams, 1992). Throughout the interview process, participants indicated that ‘blogging’ was more than creating a platform, writing posts, and uploading images. Bloggers must engage in actions and behaviors that are acceptable to the audience. According to Rocamora (2011), these actions and behaviors include posting on a consistent basis, sharing relevant content, and engaging with audience members. In this section, these components are discussed through three sub-themes: (1) a matter of time (2) structure of content, and (3) responding to the audience.

### ***A Matter of Time***

Two of the four participants had full-time jobs in addition to their blogs. Because of the time restriction, these participants adopted strategies for taking photos, scheduling posts, and engaging with audience members. For example, Emily scheduled meetings with her photographer once a month. During the photo shoot, she changed into different outfits that she planned to upload to the blog over a one-month period.

Emily recalled,

What I try to do for shooting wise is shoot three or four on a Sunday so I have that for the month and I try to post them the same day at the same time every week. I post once a week on Thursday, usually 10 or 11am. I try to be very consistent about that and plan ahead of time so I know what's going up that week.

In addition, Emily dedicated Wednesday nights to writing and scheduling blog posts.

Once a blog post was ready to go live, it was placed in a queue, then released the following morning. As a supplement to the post, Emily uploads a photo to Instagram with a small blurb to let her followers know about the new blog entry. As her followers review the post, she responds to questions or comments they have about the content. According to Emily, this process takes, on average, eight to ten hours of her time each week.

Usually I finish on Wednesday night and I schedule it for 10 or 11 the next morning. On Thursday when I get to work, I skim over the post real quick before it goes live and check my language to make sure that they're back-linking correctly. Then, I just wait for it to publish. It automatically pushes to my social media channels, but I make sure to put a picture on Instagram that relates to that post and then continually get engagement the rest of the day. Interact with readers or followers or what have you. Later on Thursday when I get home, I try to look at the next week... like what's going on the next week.

With Emily's schedule, she needed a structured process to ensure that her posts were timely and consistent. By taking photos ahead of time and dedicating certain nights of the week to blogging, Emily has been able to balance her career with her passion.

Like Emily, Grace works full-time but her time is divided into three separate areas: (1) blogging, (2) digital media consulting, and (3) personal styling. She explained, "I have the blog, as well as doing some digital media consulting because, by nature, you



have to promote yourself. The third component of that is I do personal styling.”

Expanding into different facets has given Grace the knowledge to be the creator, promotor, and style coordinator of her blog. When asked how she balances her life with blogging, she responded,

Monday, normally, is just waking up. Probably going to write a post that morning because I try to publish Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I’m an overachiever who tries to shoot far out. I last saw Kim in December and we shot like seven or eight looks. I try to schedule a lot of content way out, so scheduling content may be shooting some during the week and planning new outfits. It really just varies, but I normally start the day with a post and then a bunch of emails. I allocate like two hours to email and I try to wrap up my day around 2. My working time probably is 9 to 2 during the day on the blog.

Grace is a planner who likes to create content and schedule photo shoots in advance. This approach allows her to dedicate time to other things, such as scouting for new outfits and responding to emails from audience members, which is important to the development of her identity as a fashion blogger.

The other two participants, Olivia and Abigail, were not employed; therefore, the way they spent their time differed from the full-time employees. In the case of Olivia, blogging is an “extra” – something that she does for fun on the side. She noted, “My daughter and my husband are my priority in life, so blogging is just my extra. I guess if things get busier there, I’m not worried about it if I didn’t get to what I wanted to do blogging.” To balance her family life and blogging, Olivia hired a marketing company to work with her Instagram account.

I pay a company to do my marketing, so that I don't have to. That took a lot of my time at the beginning when my daughter was really little. Now, I'm like, I don't want to mess with all of that, so I just do the minimum. Not the minimum, but I do the stuff that I need to do. It helps to have the marketing going on without me having to put in more time away from my family.

As a follow up question, Olivia was asked about marketing firms and what they do to promote fashion bloggers on Instagram. She replied,

There's a lot of different ways to get bigger on Instagram, but one of them is just tons of exposure. Liking tons of other people's photos so people know you exist. So, it takes a ton of time, obviously, because you've got to do so many to get a percentage back. They do that all night and day. Things are working, so... More followers, so that's good.

Investing in the services of a marketing firm provided an outlet for Olivia. It allowed her to spend more time with her family and increase her following on Instagram. Followers are a critical component to a successful blogging platform. Without the support of an engaged audience, bloggers do not have the leverage to set themselves apart.

### ***Structure of Content***

Fashion bloggers are a niche group that have similar interests. It is not uncommon to see posts that discuss the latest fashion trends and images that show 'how to wear' certain items. That said, the context in which the information is presented often varies from blogger to blogger. In some cases, the blogger may focus on a certain type of retailer or physical aspect of the self that is catered to a specific audience. For example, Abigail considers herself a 'petite' blogger, so she directs her posts toward those who are shorter than the average height of 5'4". As such, most of her content is focused on how to wear trends on a short frame without having each piece professionally altered.

I can't just go out and wear over the knee boots because they're going to make me look even shorter than I already am. For me, it's finding ways to navigate some of those trends and find ways to make some of those trends work on a shorter frame. It's just trying to figure out how to wear those trends and cute clothes without having to constantly have my stuff tailored. That can get expensive.

Likewise, Olivia uses her Mormon-based blog as a platform to display clothing options for conservative women. When asked if she thought the modesty aspect of her blog set her apart, she replied, "Definitely. Even among Mormon bloggers, I think I still have a more conservative standing because I don't wear bikinis and stuff."

Focusing on the retail side, Emily created her blog around her love and passion for thrift shopping. Because thrift shopping is not a common theme among fashion bloggers, Emily has transitioned out of a saturated market into a niche market with a strong following. This aspect of her blog is something that she considers to be unique and sets her apart from other bloggers.

Most of the bloggers that I interact with in my immediate network that are fashion bloggers are... two of them are budget conscious but not thrifting. Some don't really have a niche. They're just fashion bloggers and I think that's very saturated and it's very hard to get noticed in that. So, I think that's one thing that makes me different.

Rather than point out a single component of her blog, Grace focused on the 'style' versus 'fashion' aspect. As she explained, it is not the fashion items themselves or the joy that comes from the purchase, but the process of integrating items together to make something new and different that fuels her passion. Grace's motivation to share this process with others is what separates her from other bloggers.

A lot of bloggers like fashion and I don't mean that in a negative way. They like fashion. They can afford to buy fashion and just put a bunch of things together and create an outfit, but I really enjoy the process of putting random things together to make an outfit. It's really a process rather than just buying something. It's more than just fashion. I really enjoy exploring style and I think that's what makes me different from other influencers.

Each participant shared an aspect of their blog - physical attribute, personal belief, store preference – that set them apart from other bloggers. These aspects served as the foundation for their platforms, which they used to engage and interact with audience members. It is through this process, specifically the comments and responses, that bloggers promote and validate their online identities.

### ***Responding to the Audience***

Audience members play an important role in the creation of online identities. Based on how their perceptions are communicated, a blogger could achieve instant fame or lose credibility in a very short period of time. For the participants in this study, it was common to respond to all comments received on a blog post. By providing a response, bloggers show appreciation for their followers and the input they provide relative to content shared on the blog. For example, Grace engages in 'instantaneous commenting,' meaning she immediately responds to comments. She explained, "Within 24 hours on a blog post, I have thanked them for commenting or if they have a question, answering that question. I try to do it instantaneously so that way it's still impactful."

Olivia, Abigail, and Emily shared similar sentiments, although they felt it was difficult to respond to emoticons or superficial statements. In the case of Olivia, she responds to most comments within a short period. However, if the comment is a one-

word expression, such as “cute,” she may not respond at all. Olivia would rather direct her attention to the genuine comments and questions posed by audience members.

I try to respond to most comments. If it’s just something like, “cute,” then I don’t... or sometimes I do, I guess. I try to reach out to as many heartfelt comments or questions as I can because I do want them to know that I’m... I want them to feel that I’m a real person.

Like her blogging counterparts, Abigail believes in responding to every comment she receives on a blog post. While she may not provide an immediate response, Abigail tries to respond in a reasonable time frame – the same day or a few days later. Her goal is to acknowledge that she received and read every post, whether it be a thought-provoking question or superficial comment that focuses solely on her appearance. Even when the comments are difficult to address, Abigail finds a way to engage with audience members to let them know their feedback is appreciated. As she explained,

I try to comment or reply to all of the comments that get made on every single post. Sometimes, that’s the same day. Sometimes, it’s the next day. Sometimes, it’s a few days. I try not to go too long without responding. But when someone leaves a comment, I like to go and at least acknowledge that I read it and reply in some way. Sometimes it’s hard because the comment is just “I love your look.”

Emily recognizes the value of an audience in promoting her online identity. Extending beyond the daily responses that she provides on digital platforms, Emily poses questions to her audience about content on the blog. Specifically, she wants to know what information she could provide that would be the most beneficial to them. Taking this approach allows Emily to address the wants and needs of her followers.

I try to engage with people on Instagram or Facebook. I try to reply to every single comment even if it's a like... just liking it or a smiley face or something. I try to do that and recently, last week I guess, I was like, I need to post and just ask people what they want to see. I've never asked my audience, What do you want to see more of? You want to see more tips? It was amazing how many people responded. People care and they listen and if they are going to ask for something, then that's what I need to do.

When bloggers receive feedback from audience members, they can respond to the comments or disregard them. The participants in this study felt it was more beneficial to respond to comments, even when the comments were shallow or superficial. In the case of one participant, she took an additional step to capture feedback from her audience. Listening and responding to audience comments is important not only to the development and promotion of an online identity, but validation of the identity. However, as the next theme describes, this process is not always easy. When bloggers put their lives on display, they are opening themselves up to more than just a fashion critique. Bloggers are creating new identities that may be accepted or rejected based on the information they share with an audience.

### **Transparency**

Transparency refers to the openness and disclosure by individuals or groups (McQuail, 2003). For example, when sponsorship opportunities are accepted by bloggers, they are displayed on the blog with a disclosure statement to inform audience members that at least one item in the post is sponsored (Lu, Chang, & Chang, 2014). Throughout the interview process, participants shared their thoughts regarding personal and professional disclosure on blogs. In this section, two sub-themes – refrain or reveal and securing sponsorship – that pertain to the validation of an online identity are discussed.

### ***Refrain or Reveal***

Participants discussed the uneasiness and apprehension they felt about sharing their lives on social media. Fear of judgement and peer-to-peer comparison had an adverse effect on their desire and ability to share. Of these participants, Emily was the most concerned about judgement from her audience. She did not want to be viewed as someone who had a high opinion of herself, nor did she want to be criticized by others for putting herself out there. Emily noted,

I was scared what people would say. Does she think she's better than everybody else? She posted an outfit on Instagram and she thinks that she's so pretty and she's got these cute clothes and all that stuff. It's just those little things that I had to get over.

Emily's mother was critical in helping her overcome these feelings. She provided support and encouragement, which Emily used to move forward and start her blog. Although she feels confident now, there are still moments when she questions her decisions. For example, she will compare herself to other bloggers, specifically those who have more followers, more site views, and better sponsorships. That said, she understands that comparing herself is not going to help her grow or mature as a fashion blogger.

I want to compare myself to other people, but you can't compare your bloopers to someone else's highlight reel. You're going to lose every time. There's always going to be someone who has something better, something more expensive, something nicer, something newer, and you're never going to win.

Grace shared similar thoughts regarding personal disclosure. When she started blogging, Grace said it felt "unnatural" to share so much of her personal life. She did not

want to mention the parts of her day that were flawed or imperfect because it put her in a vulnerable position. However, Grace understood the duties and responsibilities associated with her role as a fashion blogger. To have a positive impact on those who followed her, Grace decided to share the ‘not so glamorous’ moments of her life. She believed that her audience could relate more to someone who shared the good with the bad, rather than someone who only shared picture-perfect moments. Grace explained,

It didn’t feel very natural at first – how much I share of my life. I do think one of the things that differentiates influencers is how much they share and the level of transparency. I think that’s really needed with the impact that we have. Maintaining that transparent tone, which is being a little vulnerable and sharing the not so glamorous moments in my life, sharing the ugly moments and finding that tone... At the same token, I share those things because I think it makes me more relatable rather than just showing personally curated moments all the time.

This approach impacted more than Grace’s identity as a fashion blogger. She described how the decision to openly share her life had an adverse effect on her relationships. “I would say that it’s changed my life. It’s definitely changed my relationships with people. I just lost my best friend because she thought I was superficial because I decided to pursue a career as an influencer.”

Grace was not the only blogger to emphasize the importance of being transparent. Olivia and Abigail discussed transparency as it pertained to clothing selections and images on their blogs. Imagery allows bloggers to communicate with their audiences without verbally disclosing every detail of their day-to-day lives. For example, Abigail used her blog to display outfits that she had previously worn or planned to wear in the



future. Connecting these ensembles to events provided insight into her life and made her more relatable to her audience. Abigail stated,

I try to only put on the blog what I've worn or plan to wear in real life. Then, I try to communicate that in some way. So, I'll say, This is what I wore to XYZ or this is what I'm going to wear for this event. Letting the readers know in some way that I actually wore this. I didn't just put it together and put it on the blog for whatever reason.

Likewise, Olivia expressed her desire for honest and transparent relationships. Recognizing that she does not share as much as her blogging counterparts, she uses the images captured while she is 'out and about' to reveal personal details of her life. Olivia recalled,

I'll feel like I'm being so real, but I realize how much I don't share. But it is a vulnerable place to be... to share what's going on in life. I need to work on that, but I definitely don't cover anything up. What I'm wearing out and about is what I take pictures of. I try not to trade stuff out just for the pictures.

While Olivia is not ready to embrace the vulnerability that comes with full disclosure, she communicates aspects of her life through images shared on her blog. This form of identity expression allows Olivia to connect with her audience through fashion, environmental surroundings, and family activities.

### ***Securing Sponsorship***

According to Williams and Hodges (2015), sponsorships are “noncontractual agreements wherein bloggers receive compensation from sponsoring marketers for their reviews and endorsements” (p. 157). Three of the four participants had engaged in sponsorships with a retailer or brand, although the number of sponsorships and length of

time in these partnerships varied by participant. For Emily, collaborating with retailers was a new avenue for her blog. Given that her primary message is thrift shopping, she thought that engaging in too many sponsorships may have a negative impact on her message. As such, Emily was not bothered by the fact that retailers did not reach out to her on a regular basis.

I'm just now dabbling in sponsorships. I've done a couple of sponsored ads on Instagram, but I'm trying to stay true to my message. My message isn't to sell products. I'm actually the opposite of that. So, I don't know if that is keeping some retailers from reaching out to me, sending me products. That's fine because I don't want my message to be, 'I shop at Goodwill, but you should go to Nordstrom and get this \$150 sweater.'

To gain a better understanding of the effect that Emily's sponsorships had on her audience, she was asked to describe two of her sponsorship posts. Her first collaboration was with a retailer for a pair of sunglasses. When Emily promoted them on the blog, she convinced three of her friends to purchase a pair. The second collaboration was with a local charity. She created a gift guide to promote products from retailers that donated a portion of the proceeds to charity (Figure 5). With both collaborations, her audience was receptive to the idea and a few members even purchased the products. By purchasing the promoted product, Emily's audience validated her identity as a fashion blogger.

I think they have responded very well. One of the first posts was a pair of sunglasses. Three of my friends... the next time I saw them... were wearing those sunglasses and I was like, Those look familiar! They were like, I know. This blogger told me about them. I did a gift guide last year around the holidays for gifts that give back... gifts that a portion of the proceeds go to charity. One of my friends was like, Thank you so much for posting that! It was super helpful. I bought this for my boyfriend's mom off the gift guide. They're not my most popular posts, but I've gotten good feedback from them and I feel like people do like them.

*Figure 5. Emily's Gift Guide*



While Emily's experience with sponsorship was limited, Olivia has been collaborating with retailers for a few years. During the interview, she described a collaboration with DIFF eyewear (Figure 6). Because Olivia likes to be in control of sponsorships, she requests that the retailer send options, then she selects what she wants to display on the blog. If the options are too limited, she may pass on the sponsorship opportunity. This selection process helps Olivia stay true to her style and remain

authentic. When a product is promoted that is in line with her style and she receives approval from her audience, her blogger identity is validated.

Right now, I'm going to work with DIFF Eyewear. I don't know if you've heard of them, but the last bachelorette, JoJo, started this line. So, I'm going to work with them and do the sunglasses. They just sent me two generations of sunglasses that they really want to bring back so they want me to help show them. I didn't have choices over the whole website, but I chose out of two generations... different colors... different frames. Sometimes, that's the case. Like they will narrow it down because they want to promote something and then I can agree to it or not. But for the most part, I can choose and I like that because it keeps my authenticity for my readers. I know what they like. I'm not doing it for anybody else, but I know that I want to stay true to what I would actually wear.

*Figure 6. Olivia's Collaboration with DIFF Eyewear*



Like Olivia, Grace has been involved with sponsorships for the past few years. Based on the outcomes of her previous collaborations, she believes that sponsorships have brought credibility to her identity as a fashion blogger. During the interview, Grace described a recent collaboration with Macy's and how it resulted in a "brand spin

around.” Grace’s promotion of Macy’s created new interest in the brand while Macy’s interest in Grace validated her online identity.

If anything, I think the sponsorships made me credible. It’s one thing to just have a blog and talk fashion. It’s another thing to be validated by a brand. So, I recently did a really large collaboration with Macy’s and I felt so official. And I think my readers really responded to that because they did like a brand spin around. They have a long history and longevity and for them to invite you to work together on something is a really, really big deal. So, it’s like a stamp of validation and I think that’s the whole... Like I said, obviously I blog because I enjoy it and I love personal style but the monetary component is affirmation to keep going.

For all three participants, sponsorships helped validate their identities. Grace’s association with a big box retailer made her feel ‘official’ while the positive feedback from Olivia and Abigail’s audience members was a sign of approval and acceptance. As evidenced in all three cases, sponsorships are most effective when bloggers select products that coincide with their established identities. It allows them to receive acknowledgement and compensation without compromising their authenticity.

### **Authenticity – What Does It Mean?**

For fashion bloggers, authenticity is directly tied to the messages communicated through their images and posts (Williams & Hodges, 2015). When these messages are consistent, the blogger shares an identity that is a true representation of herself. In her interview, Emily discussed authenticity as it pertains to sponsorships from retailers. She does not collaborate with retail partners very often, mainly due to the potential it has to dilute her message. Before Emily accepts a sponsorship, she poses the question, “Can I hear myself saying this?” If not, she will pass on the sponsorship and wait for something that is more in line with her mission and values. While she understands that this could be

a missed opportunity, Emily would rather share her daily life. This conscious decision to accept her thoughts and feelings is a form of self-validation.

I try to stay as authentic as possible and I turn down sponsorships or people and products that I think are contrary to my message. I also try to read what I am saying out loud and think, Can I hear myself saying this? Is this something that I would say or do I sound like an idiot? One of the best compliments that I've received from one of my best friends was, When I read your post today, I could literally hear you saying it. You know, I'm not everybody's cup of tea, but it reads that I'm real and you can decide... if you like me, you really like me. You don't like the person I'm personifying online.

For Abigail, it was her images that communicated authenticity. She wanted her audience members to know that what was shown on the blog was an accurate portrayal of what she would wear in real life. To emphasize this message, Abigail shared a post about fashion in real life versus fashion on the blog. Within this post, she offered full disclosure to her audience about what she was wearing and explained when and where she may exchange one item for another.

I just try to communicate that it's my real life style. There even is a post that I have about wearing real life versus for the blog. I even say, Okay. So, just for the sake of full disclosure... I thought that this outfit was really cute because I wore it with heels. But I was like, You know what. In real life, I'm probably not going to wear these heels with it. I'm going to wear some flats or something like that, depending on where I'm going. I have the shirt and the pants... Yes, I wore those together but for the sake of the pictures, the heels look good. When I wore them to the event, I wore flats.

When asked about authenticity in her interview, Grace referred to the candid moments in life. Rather than create generic content and upload pretty pictures, Grace preferred to share what was happening in the moment. For example, she shared a

transparency post in January that discussed the death of a close friend, her vague plans for the future, and a robbery that occurred at her home. Disclosure of these personal moments is a form of self-validation in that Grace accepted her own experiences.

So, authenticity lately has been doing a lot more candid moments – what’s happening in my life past pretty pictures. Incorporating unique stories with really great images. Maybe a style picture but being a little more vulnerable about what’s happening in my life. The last transparency post I did was maybe around January 1<sup>st</sup> and it was just talking about how life has really sucked the last six months. Losing a friend, graduating from graduate school, which is amazing but still not figuring out exactly where your starting point is for your career. I obviously have a job, but what’s next for me? We got robbed. Really just talking about those more transparent, authentic moments that are really happening in my life rather than just showcasing personal style.

As evidenced in the participant responses, authenticity is important to the validation of an online identity. Self-validation, in particular, is critical in that it shows the blogger knows and understands the message that she wants to communicate to her audience. In addition to self-validation, it is important to receive validation from those who review the content. In the next section, the tool designed to measure authenticity from the perspective of the blog audience is presented and discussed.

### **Scale Development**

In the marketing literature, authenticity has been used to describe objects, experiences, and individuals (Arnould & Price, 2000; Barthel & von Maltzahn, 2015; Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Beverland et al., 2008; Peterson, 2005; Rose & Wood, 2005; Wang, 1999). Although authenticity scales have been developed for specific purposes (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Morhart, Malar, Guevremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014) and the term is understood from a

qualitative perspective, a scale that measures the authenticity of individuals, fashion bloggers in particular, has not been developed. To address this gap, themes that emerged from the interviews were used to develop items for a new blogger authenticity scale. Churchill's (1979) procedure for developing multi-item measures was used to guide the process, as it provides a foundation for defining, testing, and measuring constructs. The suggested procedure includes a sequence of eight steps: (1) *specify the domain of the construct*, (2) *generate a sample of items*, (3) *collect data*, (4) *purify the measure*, (5) *collect data*, (6) *assess reliability*, (7) *assess validity*, and (8) *develop norms*. In this section, the first seven steps are addressed. Since the last step, *develop norms*, is tied to future research, it is discussed in the next chapter.

In the first step, *specify the domain of the construct*, the construct is defined and explained. This part of the process helps the researcher determine how the construct should be measured and what the construct should measure. *Generate a sample of items* refers to the creation of items that capture the meaning of the construct, as specified in the definition. Observation of blogs, in-depth interviews conducted with fashion bloggers, and literature on authenticity were used to develop the items for this study. Once the item pool was created and items were assessed by the dissertation committee (face validity), the next step was to *collect data* from participants. To *purify the measure*, *confirm dimensionality*, and *assess reliability and validity*, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted with the data. Lastly, to *assess construct validity*, data were collected from another sample using the authenticity scale and items from two related constructs: (1) blogger sponsorship and (2) number of



sponsorships. Table 2 provides an outline of the scale development procedure and analysis. Each step in the procedure is discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

*Table 2. Scale Development Procedure and Analysis*

Procedure	Analysis	Data Collected
1. Construct definition		
▪ Domain specification	Literature review	
2. Item pool development		
▪ Item generation	In-depth interviews	Study 1: Interviews with four fashion bloggers
▪ Content validity	Committee members	
▪ Face validity	Committee members	
3. Measurement purification		
▪ Dimensionality	EFA	Study 2: MTurk participants ( $n = 249$ )
▪ Reliability	Coefficient alpha	
4. Verification of dimensionality		
▪ Confirmation of dimensionality	CFA	Study 3: MTurk participants ( $n = 250$ )
▪ Assessment of discriminant and convergent validity		
5. Assessment of reliability		
▪ Internal consistency	Coefficient alpha	Study 3: MTurk participants ( $n = 250$ )
6. Assessment of construct validity		
▪ Criterion related	Coefficient alpha	Study 4: MTurk participants ( $n = 139$ )

Adapted from: Pervan, S. J., Bove, L. L., & Johnson, L. W. (2009). Reciprocity as a key stabilizing norm of interpersonal marketing relationships: Scale development and validation. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 38(1), 60-70.

### **Domain of the Construct**

Over the years, authenticity has been assigned meanings ranging from broad to specific, depending on the context in which it is presented (Belk & Costa, 1998; Beverland, 2006; Beverland et al., 2008; Cohen, 1988; Culler, 1981; Kates, 2004; Leigh et al., 2006; MacCannell, 1973). Described as something “genuine, real, and/or true” (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009, p. 839), the term has been used to study online reviews (Mkono, 2012), cultural practices (Wang, 1999), perceived product value (Barthel & von

Maltzahn, 2015), symbolic representation in ethnic groups (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009), brand-related marketing (Beverland et al., 2008), and more recently, fashion blogging (Marwick, 2013; Williams & Hodges, 2015).

Although authenticity has been examined from different perspectives, the instruments used to measure it are limited in scope. Because the definition is broad and open to interpretation, it has been extremely difficult for researchers to develop a universal scale that can be adapted for use in different contexts. To address this issue, the term, authenticity, was defined based on the literature, then refined through in-depth interviews prior to developing the scale items.

### **Item Generation, Content Validity, and Face Validity**

During the first interview, participants were asked questions pertaining to their role as a fashion blogger. These questions focused on the specific aspects of being a blogger, including blog ownership, clothing and style preferences, sponsorships, and communication. During the last two interviews, participants were asked questions pertaining to their role as an audience member. Most of these questions focused on their perceptions of and experiences with other fashion bloggers (Appendix A).

From the interviews, a total of 49 items were generated: 19 for the first proposed dimension (cognitive intimacy), 18 for the second proposed dimension (affirmation), and 12 for the third proposed dimension (transparency). While some items were phrased in a similar manner, they were kept and used in the content assessment. According to DeVellis (1991), the use of redundant items is appropriate, providing they are not identical, as it is “an important component of internal consistency reliability” (p. 63).

Once established, the items were evaluated for content validity using a three-phase process: (1) initial screening for errors (i.e., improperly worded items, double-barreled items), (2) assessment of the applicability to each dimension, and (3) assessment of representativeness to each dimension (Pervan et al., 2009).

The initial screening was conducted by all five dissertation committee members. Three members of the committee have a background in Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies while two members have a background in Marketing. Each member reviewed the items and indicated if an issue was present. Issues were addressed by modifying or removing items from the list of options. For example, ‘fashion’ was added to the end of the item, *The blogger/influencer openly discusses topics that are relatable to their audience (i.e., fashion)*. Moreover, one member recommended that two items be reverse coded, as it may identify other potential factors in the EFA (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). The two items that were reverse coded include, *The blogger/influencer never collaborates with retail partners to promote sponsored products* and *Personally, I do not like to see sponsored items as the blogger's/influencer's reviews could not be honest*. Lastly, one member suggested that a global item be added to each dimension of authenticity, as well as an overall item for authenticity.

Following the review, the committee assessed face validity, which is the degree to which the items in a scale measure the construct (Rossiter, 2002). Members were provided a list of the items and a definition for each dimension. Each member was asked to assign the items to one of three dimensions (cognitive intimacy, affirmation, transparency) or to an ‘other’ category by placing an (X) in the column he or she found to

be most appropriate. To assess representativeness of the items, the members were asked to rate the relevance of each item on a scale from 0 (does not represent at all) to 9 (represents perfectly). Items that were not placed in the appropriate category by at least four of the five members were removed from consideration (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). Through this process, eight items were removed, which resulted in 45 items for subsequent screening. Table 3 includes the list of items that were generated from the in-depth interviews.

### **Purify the Measure**

All 45 items were presented in a survey with a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) (Appendix D). The survey was administered to 638 participants through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Prior to starting the survey, participants responded to two screening questions: (1) *Have you ever visited a fashion blog?* and (2) *Have you followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer for at least six months?* This screening process eliminated 139 participants, resulting in 499 responses. A split sample approach was then used to complete the EFA ( $n = 249$ ) and CFA ( $n = 250$ ). According to Comrey and Lee (1992), these sample sizes are sufficient given that five observations per item are included. Participants in the EFA were primarily female (60%), aged 25-34 (55%), Caucasian (74%) with a Bachelor's degree (50%) and a monthly income between \$3,000 and \$4,999 (33%). Table 4 provides an overview of the demographic data collected from the MTurk participants.

Table 3. Items Generated from the In-Depth Interviews

Items Selected
I like to connect with the blogger/influencer by recreating outfits that I see in posts and images
When the blogger/influencer posts content, the information is shared in a way that bonds her audience
The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends
I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read her posts
I feel similar to the blogger/influencer in terms of taste and knowledge of fashion
I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading her posts
When I read posts shared by the blogger/influencer, I feel I am part of the group
I feel connected to the blogger/influencer through her posts and images
When the blogger/influencer shares her thoughts about an item, it helps me make up my mind about the item
I think of the blogger/influencer as an old friend
I like to mimic the look of the blogger/influencer that I see in posts and images
The blogger/influencer openly discusses her personal style through posts and images
I develop thoughts about fashion by reading posts shared by the blogger/influencer
The blogger/influencer seems to understand things I want to know
The blogger/influencer responds to comments and/or questions I have about her posts
I think the blogger/influencer is relatable through her posts and images
Based on her posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good
I think the blogger/influencer presents herself in a socially acceptable manner
Based on her post and images, I think the blogger/influencer is sincere
I think the blogger/influencer has admirable qualities that are validated through her posts and images
Based on her posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is appealing
Based on her posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is credible
Based on her posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is believable
I support the blogger/influencer by commenting on her posts and images
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are appropriate for her audience
I view the blogger/influencer as a legitimate source of fashion knowledge
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are interesting
Based on her posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is genuine
I view the blogger/influencer as credible when she shares unedited photos that display her mood and appearance
I think the blogger/influencer is honest with her thoughts and opinions
I question the credibility of the blogger/influencer when full disclosure is not provided in the post
The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when she collaborates with retail partners
I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with her thoughts and opinions of products
The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored
Personally, I do not like to see sponsored items as the blogger's/influencer's reviews could not be honest
I think the blogger/influencer builds trust with her audience when she discloses that a product is sponsored
When the blogger/influencer posts about a sponsored product, I think she is honest with her review of the product
I think the blogger/influencer is unbiased with her review of sponsored products
The blogger/influencer never collaborates with retail partners to promote sponsored products
Items Removed
The blogger/influencer appears to have a pleasant demeanor in her posts and images
I think the blogger/influencer presents herself as a natural, down-to-earth person
The blogger/influencer openly discusses topics that are relatable to her audience (i.e., fashion)
I rely on the blogger/influencer for information about current fashion trends
I think the blogger/influencer communicates her thoughts in an appropriate and effective manner
I think the blogger/influencer posts content that makes her appear trustworthy
The blogger/influencer posts at optimal times for her audience to read and provide feedback
Even when the blogger/influencer posts about a sponsored product, she ties it into her personal style

*Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of the EFA Sample (n = 249)*

Gender		Age		Ethnicity	
Male	40%	18-24	17%	White or Caucasian	74%
Female	60%	25-34	55%	Black or African American	14%
		35-44	19%	American Indian or Alaska Native	2%
		45-54	6%	Asian	10%
		55-64	3%		
Monthly Income				Education	
		\$999 or below	8%	High school degree or equivalent (GED)	7%
		\$1,000-\$2,999	29%	Some college, no degree	23%
		\$3,000-\$4,999	33%	Associate degree (AA, AS, AAS)	11%
		\$5,000-\$6,999	16%	Bachelor’s degree (BA, BS)	50%
		\$7,000 and above	14%	Master’s degree (MA, MS, MEd)	7%
				Professional degree (MD, DDS, DVM)	2%

An EFA was conducted to identify the number of dimensions that comprise the authenticity construct (Table 5). The principal components method was used with a varimax rotation to produce uncorrelated factors (Costello & Osborne, 2005), which were extracted using Kaiser's (1960) criteria (eigenvalue > 1 rule). Factor loadings were interpreted using guidelines suggested by Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010), who state, "factor loadings in the range of .3 to .4 are considered to meet the minimal level for interpretation of structure" (p. 115). Items that did not load on the appropriate dimension were removed, as were items that loaded on multiple factors (cross-loading). Factors were considered reliable if they had three loadings of 0.6 or higher (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988). Results of the EFA revealed three factors – cognitive intimacy ( $\alpha=.856$ ), affirmation ( $\alpha=.816$ ), and transparency ( $\alpha=.800$ ) – that explained 57.24% of the total variation. Table 6 presents the final list of items and their factor loadings. These results support the proposed dimensionality of the construct from the in-depth interviews. Table 7 includes the mean and standard deviation of these items.

Table 5. Exploratory Factor Analysis (All Items)

Item Code	Item	Eigenvalue						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Cog11	I think of the blogger/influencer as an old friend	.764						
Aff14	I support the blogger/influencer by commenting on their posts and images	.718						
Cog4	I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts	.672						
Cog3	The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends	.633						
Cog7	When I read posts shared by the blogger/influencer, I feel I am part of the group	.630				.407		
Cog1	I like to connect with the blogger/influencer by recreating outfits that I see in posts and images	.624						
Cog13	The blogger/influencer responds to comments and/or questions I have about their posts	.614						
Cog12	I like to mimic the look of the blogger/influencer that I see in posts and images	.603	.458					
Cog9	I feel connected to the blogger/influencer through their posts and images	.556						
Cog6	I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading their posts	.498						
Cog5	I feel similar to the blogger/influencer in terms of taste and knowledge of fashion	.489						
Trans10	The blogger/influencer never collaborates with retail partners to promote sponsored products	.455						
Cog16	The blogger/influencer seems to understand things I want to know							
Cog14	The blogger/influencer openly discusses their personal style through posts and images	.681						
Aff10	I view the blogger/influencer as a legitimate source of fashion knowledge	.638						
GenA	I feel like the blogger receives approval and support from their audience	.615						
Trans7	I think the blogger/influencer builds trust with their audience when they disclose that a product is sponsored	.591						
Cog15	I develop thoughts about fashion by reading posts shared by the blogger/influencer	.590						
Aff13	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are appropriate for their audience	.561				.444		
Aff4	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good	.499	.481					
Cog10	When the blogger/influencer shares their thoughts about an item, it helps me make up my mind about the item	.405	.494					
GenCI	I feel like the blogger connects and bonds with their audience	.491						
Aff1	Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is sincere		.680					
Auth	I think the blogger is authentic		.660					
Aff3	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing	.425	.635					
Trans1	I think the blogger/influencer is honest with their thoughts and opinions		.620					
Aff5	Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is credible		.612					
Aff2	Based on their posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable		.591					
Aff9	Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is believable		.446	.428				
Cog2	When the blogger/influencer posts content, the information is shared in a way that bonds their audience	.411	.445					
Trans3	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when they collaborate with retail partners				.669			
Trans6	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored				.646			
Trans9	I think the blogger/influencer is unbiased with their review of sponsored products	.460			.605			
Trans8	When the blogger/influencer posts about a sponsored product, I think they are honest with their review of the product	.407			.517			
Trans4	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their thoughts and opinions of products				.473			
Aff11	Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is genuine							
Aff6	I think the blogger/influencer presents themselves in a socially acceptable manner				.643			
Cog8	I think the blogger/influencer is relatable through their posts and images				.576			
Aff15	I think the blogger/influencer has admirable qualities that are validated through their posts and images	.405			.488			
GenT	I think the blogger is transparent with their audience				.406	.482		
Aff8	Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is appealing	.437			.469			
Aff12	I view the blogger/influencer as credible when they share unedited photos that display their mood and appearance					.607		
Aff7	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are interesting	.424				.593		
Trans5	Personally, I do not like to see sponsored items as the blogger's/influencer's reviews could not be honest						.786	
Trans2	I question the credibility of the blogger/influencer when full disclosure is not provided in the post						.757	

Table 6. Exploratory Factor Analysis (Final Items)

Item Code	Item	Cognitive Intimacy	Affirmation	Transparency
		$\alpha = .856$	$\alpha = .816$	$\alpha = .800$
Cog11	I think of the blogger/influencer as an old friend	.805		
Cog4	I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts	.742		
Cog3	The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends	.724		
Cog7	When I read posts shared by the blogger/influencer, I feel I am part of the group	.672		
Cog1	I like to connect with the blogger/influencer by recreating outfits that I see in posts and images	.648		
Cog13	The blogger/influencer responds to comments and/or questions I have about their posts	.640		
Cog6	I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading their posts	.504		
Aff12	I view the blogger/influencer as credible when they share unedited photos that display their mood and appearance		.713	
Aff4	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good		.705	
Aff7	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are interesting		.704	
Aff3	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing		.659	
Aff10	I view the blogger/influencer as a legitimate source of fashion knowledge		.626	
Aff2	Based on their posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable		.579	
Trans6	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored			.816
Trans3	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when they collaborate with retail partners			.715
GenT	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their audience			.617
Trans4	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their thoughts and opinions of products			.570



Table 7. Mean and Standard Deviation of EFA Items

Item Code	Item	Mean	SD
Cog11	I think of the blogger/influencer as an old friend	3.02	1.30
Cog4	I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts	3.63	1.00
Cog3	The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends	3.60	1.04
Cog7	When I read posts shared by the blogger/influencer, I feel I am part of the group	3.55	1.05
Cog1	I like to connect with the blogger/influencer by recreating outfits that I see in posts and images	3.51	1.09
Cog13	The blogger/influencer responds to comments and/or questions I have about their posts	3.37	1.17
Cog6	I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading their posts	3.43	1.09
Aff12	I view the blogger/influencer as credible when they share unedited photos that display their mood and appearance	3.89	.92
Aff4	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good	4.00	.84
Aff7	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are interesting	4.08	.84
Aff3	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing	3.96	.89
Aff10	I view the blogger/influencer as a legitimate source of fashion knowledge	3.89	.92
Aff2	Based on their posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable	3.96	.85
Trans6	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored	3.68	.95
Trans3	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when they collaborate with retail partners	3.68	1.03
GenT	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their audience	3.76	1.03
Trans4	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their thoughts and opinions of products	3.67	.97

## Confirmation of Dimensionality, Reliability, and Validity

A CFA was conducted to test how well the items represent the constructs identified in the EFA (Marsh et al., 2014). Participants in the CFA were fifty-nine percent female, aged 25-34 (50%), Caucasian (69%) with a Bachelor's degree (46%) and an average monthly income between \$3,000 and \$4,999 (32%). Table 8 provides an overview of the demographic data collected from the MTurk participants.

*Table 8. Demographic Characteristics of the CFA Sample (n = 250)*

Gender		Age		Ethnicity	
Male	41%	18-24	12%	White or Caucasian	69%
Female	59%	25-34	50%	Black or African American	16%
		35-44	27%	American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
		45-54	7%	Asian	12%
		55-64	3%	Other	2%
		65+	1%		
Monthly Income			Education		
		\$999 or below	6%	High school degree or equivalent (GED)	7%
		\$1,000-\$2,999	31%	Some college, no degree	17%
		\$3,000-\$4,999	32%	Associate degree (AA, AS, AAS)	15%
		\$5,000-\$6,999	17%	Bachelor’s degree (BA, BS)	46%
		\$7,000 and above	14%	Master’s degree (MA, MS, MEd)	15%

Initially, the CFA included all 17 items from the EFA. Once the CFA was completed, model fit was assessed using the following statistics:  $\chi^2$ , CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR (Kline, 2005). To have acceptable model fit, a chi-square value at the .05 threshold, a CFI value at (or above) .95, a RMSEA value at (or below) .06, and a SRMR value at (or below) .08 is recommended (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Preliminary results revealed that the proposed model lacked fit in many areas ( $\chi^2 = 312.62$  ( $p = 0.00$ );  $DF =$

116; CFI = .901; RMSEA = .083; SRMR = .068). Additionally, most of the items showed high correlation. Table 9 displays the correlation table for all 17 items in the EFA.

To address these issues, standardized estimates (factor loadings) were examined on the model. According to Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2018), items in a CFA should load at (or above) .50. Moreover, items must have a critical ratio value (t-value) of 1.96 or higher to be significant at the 5% level (Bechger, van den Wittenboer, Hox, & De Gopper, 1999). While all items loaded above .50 and were statistically significant, the lowest factor loadings were removed to reduce correlation and increase the likelihood of convergent and discriminant validity. Table 10 includes factor loadings and t-values for all items used in the CFA. After each item was removed, model fit was assessed, as well as composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. If removing an item had a negative effect, it was placed back in the model and another item with a low factor loading was removed. This process was repeated until acceptable model fit was achieved and all three factors had convergent and discriminant validity.

The final CFA was conducted with nine items. Results from this CFA revealed acceptable model fit ( $\chi^2 = 80.436$  ( $p = 0.00$ );  $DF = 24$ ; CFI = .942; RMSEA = .097; SRMR = .061). While the proposed model did lack fit in some areas, this is not uncommon with the complex nature of structural equation modeling (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). For example, some fit indices (i.e., chi-square) are sensitive to sample size, which often results in an inadequate assessment of the model (Hooper et al., 2008). In addition, all items loaded above .50. Table 11 provides a list of the factor loadings.

Table 9. Correlation Table for EFA Items

	Cog11	Cog4	Cog3	Cog7	Cog1	Cog13	Cog6	Aff12	Aff4	Aff7	Aff3	Aff10	Aff2	Trans6	GenT	Trans3	Trans4
<b>Cog11</b>	-																
<b>Cog4</b>	.512**	-															
<b>Cog3</b>	.530**	.605**	-														
<b>Cog7</b>	.509**	.515**	.467**	-													
<b>Cog1</b>	.426**	.476**	.415**	.466**	-												
<b>Cog13</b>	.497**	.408**	.421**	.482**	.470**	-											
<b>Cog6</b>	.429**	.470**	.404**	.462**	.453**	.331**	-										
<b>Aff12</b>	.128*	.340**	.283**	.272**	.165**	.191**	.374**	-									
<b>Aff4</b>	.183**	.293**	.216**	.315**	.370**	.253**	.347**	.395**	-								
<b>Aff7</b>	0.058	.164**	.169**	.282**	.262**	.144*	.304**	.527**	.428**	-							
<b>Aff3</b>	.254**	.360**	.312**	.373**	.308**	.257**	.400**	.456**	.512**	.337**	-						
<b>Aff10</b>	.202**	.360**	.274**	.366**	.321**	.265**	.412**	.412**	.419**	.409**	.464**	-					
<b>Aff2</b>	.225**	.379**	.362**	.357**	.308**	.253**	.426**	.374**	.472**	.265**	.529**	.387**	-				
<b>Trans6</b>	.224**	.244**	.320**	.310**	.236**	.320**	.391**	.393**	.356**	.347**	.387**	.349**	.377**	-			
<b>GenT</b>	.323**	.388**	.459**	.456**	.275**	.507**	.469**	.366**	.355**	.249**	.450**	.450**	.497**	.519**	-		
<b>Trans3</b>	.175**	.331**	.250**	.327**	.351**	.288**	.410**	.283**	.345**	.365**	.368**	.311**	.263**	.593**	.382**	-	
<b>Trans4</b>	.376**	.398**	.347**	.437**	.338**	.405**	.452**	.398**	.387**	.288**	.478**	.469**	.432**	.494**	.604**	.422**	-

\*p<.05 (two-tailed)

\*\*p<.01 (two-tailed)

Table 10. Factor Loadings and t-values for CFA Items

Item Code	Item	Loading	t-value
Cog11	I think of the blogger/influencer as an old friend	.66	9.93
Cog4	I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts	.75	9.09
Cog3	The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends	.71	9.51
Cog7	When I read posts shared by the blogger/influencer, I feel I am part of the group	.66	9.91
Cog1	I like to connect with the blogger/influencer by recreating outfits that I see in posts and images	.58	10.34
Cog13	The blogger/influencer responds to comments and/or questions I have about their posts	.62	10.17
Cog6	I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading their posts	.74	9.17
Aff12	I view the blogger/influencer as credible when they share unedited photos that display their mood and appearance	.69	9.77
Aff4	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good	.73	9.33
Aff7	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are interesting	.66	9.96
Aff3	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing	.74	9.28
Aff10	I view the blogger/influencer as a legitimate source of fashion knowledge	.65	10.04
Aff2	Based on their posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable	.71	9.60
Trans6	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored	.78	8.82
Trans3	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when they collaborate with retail partners	.75	9.13
GenT	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their audience	.78	8.71
Trans4	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their thoughts and opinions of products	.77	8.95

Table 11. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Final Items)

Item Code	Item	Cognitive Intimacy	Affirmation	Transparency
Cog4	I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts	.81		
Cog3	The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends	.73		
Cog6	I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading their posts	.73		
Aff2	Based on their posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable		.75	
Aff3	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing		.74	
Aff4	I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good		.69	
Trans6	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored			.86
Trans3	The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when they collaborate with retail			.82
GenT	I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their audience			.70

To assess reliability of the scale, composite reliability was calculated in conjunction with structural equation modeling. According to Peterson and Kim (2013), composite reliability “includes better estimates of true reliability than possible through coefficient alpha because construct loadings are allowed to vary, whereas the loadings for coefficient alpha are constrained to be equal” (p. 195). To assess the validity of the scale, two types, convergent and discriminant, were examined. Convergent validity is the degree to which the measure correlates with other measures used to evaluate the same construct. Conversely, discriminant validity is the degree to which the measure is unrelated to measures designed to evaluate other constructs (Churchill, 1979). Once convergent and discriminant validity were achieved, the authenticity scale was placed in a survey along with items for two additional constructs: (1) blogger responsiveness and (2) number of sponsorships (Appendix E). This survey was distributed to a third sample to confirm the outcome of the CFA.

Composite reliabilities ranged from .772 to .839, which indicates that the construct is reliable. In addition, average variance extracted (AVE) was above the recommended value of .50 for all three factors – cognitive intimacy (.572), affirmation (.531), and transparency (.636) – indicating that the construct has convergent validity. To determine if the construct had discriminant validity, the AVE values were compared to the maximum shared variance (MSV) of each factor (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In all three cases, the AVE was higher than the MSV, indicating that the construct has discriminant validity. Table 12 provides a list of the composite reliabilities, AVEs, and MSVs.

Table 12. Composite Reliability, AVE, and MSV

Factor	Composite Reliability	AVE	MSV
Cognitive Intimacy	.800	.572	.430
Affirmation	.772	.531	.520
Transparency	.839	.636	.520

### Construct Validity

To establish construct validity, the authenticity scale was tested with two hypothesized predictors – blogger responsiveness and number of sponsorships – as well as other related constructs, including trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Before the survey was distributed on MTurk, six individuals who were familiar with the study responded to the items. The results from this pretest provided an expected time frame for completion. The minimum amount of time spent on the survey was 8 minutes and 15 seconds while the maximum amount of time spent on the survey was 10 minutes and 20 seconds.

According to Chandler, Mueller, and Paolacci (2014), when individuals repeatedly participate in MTurk tasks, it can lead to practice effects. For example, participants may become accustomed to completing surveys in a certain amount of time. This type of practice effect can pose a problem when the task extends beyond the participant's expected time frame. In some cases, participants may not spend adequate time on the remaining items. In other cases, the task is abandoned when the expected time frame is reached. With an understanding of these potential issues, the survey was distributed to more participants than were needed for the confirmation sample. This



approach to data collection was used as a precautionary measure based on prior concerns addressed in the literature (Chandler, Mueller, & Paolacci, 2014).

The survey was distributed to 499 participants in MTurk. Incomplete tasks and surveys that were completed before the minimum time frame in the pretest (8 minutes and 15 seconds) were removed from consideration. Elimination of these participants resulted in 139 useable responses. Participants in the confirmation sample were fifty-two percent male, aged 25-34 (58%), Caucasian (67%) with a Bachelor's degree (50%) and an average monthly income between \$3,000 and \$4,999 (34%). Table 13 provides an overview of the demographic data collected from the MTurk participants.

*Table 13. Demographic Characteristics of the Confirmation Sample (n = 139)*

Gender		Age		Ethnicity	
Male	52%	18-24	16%	White or Caucasian	67%
Female	48%	25-34	58%	Black or African American	16%
		35-44	14%	American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
		45-54	9%	Asian	7%
		55-64	3%	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%
				Other	8%
Monthly Income				Education	
		\$999 or below	4%	High school degree or equivalent (GED)	9%
		\$1,000-\$2,999	28%	Some college, no degree	14%
		\$3,000-\$4,999	34%	Associate degree (AA, AS, AAS)	10%
		\$5,000-\$6,999	19%	Bachelor’s degree (BA, BS)	50%
		\$7,000 and above	15%	Master’s degree (MA, MS, MEd)	13%
				Doctorate (PhD, EdD)	2%
				Professional degree (MD, DDS, DVM)	2%

Because the EFA revealed and the CFA confirmed three factors of authenticity – cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency – the tests were conducted on each factor individually. With the first hypothesis, it was suggested that, *Blogger*

*responsiveness will have a significant positive relationship with blogger authenticity.*

Multiple regression was performed and revealed a significant positive relationship with cognitive intimacy ( $\beta = .381$ ;  $t(1, 138) = 4.820$ ;  $p < .001$ ), a significant positive relationship with affirmation ( $\beta = .387$ ;  $t(1, 138) = 4.917$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and a significant positive relationship with transparency ( $\beta = .360$ ;  $t(1, 138) = 4.520$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The second hypothesis proposed that, *The number of sponsorships will have a negative relationship with blogger authenticity.* Multiple regression was performed and revealed a non-significant relationship with cognitive intimacy ( $\beta = -.029$ ;  $t(1, 138) = -.336$ ;  $p > .05$ ), a non-significant relationship with affirmation ( $\beta = -.117$ ;  $t(1, 138) = -1.379$ ;  $p > .05$ ), and a non-significant relationship with transparency ( $\beta = -.063$ ;  $t(1, 138) = -.743$ ;  $p > .05$ ).

Table 14 provides the regression results for H1a-c and H2a-c.

Additionally, MANOVA was performed to assess the differences between males and females on the three factors. MANOVA showed a significant difference between males and females on cognitive intimacy ( $M_{\text{Male}} = 3.770$  versus  $M_{\text{Female}} = 3.470$ ;  $F(1, 138) = 4.409$ ;  $p < .05$ ). However, it did not reveal a significant difference between males and females on affirmation ( $M_{\text{Male}} = 3.890$  versus  $M_{\text{Female}} = 3.930$ ;  $F(1, 138) = .059$ ;  $p > .05$ ) or transparency ( $M_{\text{Male}} = 3.690$  versus  $M_{\text{Female}} = 3.720$ ;  $F(1, 138) = .048$ ;  $p > .05$ ).

Tables 15 and 16 provide the MANOVA results.

Table 14. Regression Results for H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>

Conditions and Variables	Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ )	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	df	F	t	Sig	Hypothesis	Supported
Regression of RES on CI	.381	.145	.139	1	23.237	4.820	***	H1a	Supported
Regression of SPON on CI	-.029	.001	-.006	1	.113	-.336	.738	H2a	Not supported
Regression of RES on AF	.387	.150	.144	1	24.181	4.917	***	H1b	Supported
Regression of SPON on AF	-.117	.014	.006	1	1.901	-1.379	.170	H2b	Not supported
Regression of RES on TR	.360	.130	.123	1	20.432	4.520	***	H1c	Supported
Regression of SPON on TR	-.063	.004	-.003	1	.553	-.743	.459	H2c	Not supported

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001

Table 15. Descriptive Statistics for MANOVA

Dependent Variable	Group	Mean	SD	N
Cognitive Intimacy	Male	3.770	.779	72
	Female	3.470	.934	67
Affirmation	Male	3.890	.787	72
	Female	3.930	.752	67
Transparency	Male	3.690	.785	72
	Female	3.720	.894	67

Table 16. MANOVA Results

Dependent Variable	df	Type III SS	Mean Square	F	Sig
Cognitive Intimacy	1	3.239	3.239	4.409	*
Affirmation	1	.035	.035	.059	.808
Transparency	1	.034	.034	.048	.827

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001

## **Summary**

In this chapter, an overview of mixed methods research was provided, specifically the use of qualitative data to inform quantitative research. This explanation was followed by a discussion of themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews. Next, the scale development process was explained using Churchill's (1979) procedure for developing better measures. Finally, the newly developed scale was tested with two constructs: (1) blogger responsiveness and (2) number of sponsorships. In the next chapter, conclusions, implications, limitations, and future research avenues are discussed.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides an explanation of the research findings. In the first section, outcomes of the qualitative and quantitative data are presented, including results of the four studies and discussion of the scale items. Next, theoretical and managerial implications are presented and discussed. Lastly, limitations of the studies are explained and suggestions for future research are provided.

#### **Summary of Findings**

The two-fold purpose of this dissertation was to understand how fashion bloggers use appearance-related components to construct online identities and to understand how blog audiences assess the authenticity of these identities. To address this purpose, a mixed-methods approach was used to (1) investigate the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction, (2) explore the role of appearance and capital (i.e., clothing) in this construction, (3) develop and empirically test a new scale for blogger authenticity, and (4) understand how blog audiences perceive the authenticity of these online personalities. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with fashion bloggers to gain a better understanding of their experiences in the blogosphere. Next, themes that emerged from the data were used to develop items for a blogger authenticity scale. After the scale was refined through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), it was tested with other related constructs, including blogger

responsiveness and number of sponsorships. Additionally, six hypotheses (H1a-H2c) were developed based on the theoretical foundation of the study, existing literature on the topic, and interpretation of the interview data.

Four studies (Study 1 – Study 4) were conducted to address the purpose and objectives of the dissertation. In the first study (Study 1), four fashion bloggers, who were 18 years or older and had managed their blogs for at least one year, responded to questions about the blogging community (Appendix A). Each blogger was asked to participate in two or three interviews, with each session lasting one to two hours. The first interview included descriptive questions about their personal blogs, such as, *How and when did you start your blog?* These questions were followed by more difficult, open-ended questions, such as, *How do you capture the attention of your audience?* Subsequent interviews focused on the blogger's role as an audience member on other blogs rather than the owner of a blog. Questions posed in these interviews included, *How many blogs do you follow? What are your main considerations when selecting a blog to follow?* At the conclusion of the interviews, the data were reviewed and categorized to identify a set of themes. Three main themes – cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency – were identified through this process and used to develop items for a new blogger authenticity scale.

Using the in-depth interviews as a guide, a total of 49 items were generated relating to the three authenticity themes: 19 for cognitive intimacy, 18 for affirmation, and 12 for transparency. To assess content validity, the dissertation committee reviewed the items for potential issues (i.e., improperly worded items, double-barreled items),

assessed the applicability of the items to each dimension, and evaluated the representativeness of the items to each dimension (Pervan et al., 2009). To assess face validity, each committee member assigned items to one of three proposed dimensions (cognitive intimacy, affirmation, transparency) or an ‘other’ category. This process resulted in 45 items for subsequent screening (Table 3).

The remaining 45 items were placed in a survey and distributed to 638 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). First, participants responded to two screening questions: (1) *Have you ever visited a fashion blog?* and (2) *Have you followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer for at least six months?* After responding to the questions, 139 participants were eliminated, which resulted in 499 useable responses. To further purify the measure and confirm dimensionality, a split sample approach was used to conduct an EFA ( $n = 249$ ) and CFA ( $n = 250$ ). For the EFA (Study 2), items that did not load on the appropriate dimension and items that loaded on multiple factors were removed. Results from Study 2 revealed 17 items across three dimensions (Table 6), which support the findings from the in-depth interviews. To confirm the dimensions identified in the EFA, a CFA (Study 3) was conducted with all 17 items. The lowest factor loadings were removed one at a time to reduce correlation between the items. This process was repeated until acceptable model fit was achieved and the factors displayed strong reliability, as well as convergent and discriminant validity (Table 12). Results from Study 3 revealed nine items across three dimensions (Table 11).

In the last study (Study 4), 139 participants responded to nine items in the authenticity scale, as well as items in other related constructs, including blogger

responsiveness and number of sponsorships. These responses were used to test two hypotheses: (1) *Blogger responsiveness will have a significant positive relationship with blogger authenticity* and (2) *The number of sponsorships will have a negative relationship with blogger authenticity*. Regression results revealed that the three dimensions of authenticity – cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency – have a significant positive relationship with blogger responsiveness and a non-significant relationship with number of sponsorships (Table 14). Moreover, a MANOVA was performed to assess the differences between males and females on the three factors. Results revealed a significant difference between males and females on cognitive intimacy and a non-significant difference between males and female on affirmation and transparency (Tables 15 and 16).

Overall, the conclusions can be summarized into the following statements: (1) Blogger authenticity is comprised of three dimensions: (a) cognitive intimacy, (b) affirmation, and (c) transparency (Study 1-3), (2) There is a significant positive relationship between blogger responsiveness and all three dimensions of authenticity (Study 4), (3) There is a non-significant relationship between number of sponsorships and all three dimensions of authenticity (Study 4), and (4) It appears that males bond with bloggers more than females when thoughts and ideas are shared (Study 4). In the next section, these conclusions are explained through a discussion of the four studies.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This section examines the findings from each of the studies (Study 1-4). Existing theories and perspectives that pertain to blogger authenticity (i.e., symbolic



interactionism, identity theory), as well as findings from previous studies, serve as the foundation for this discussion. At the end of the section, a summary of the core components is provided.

### **Discussion of Study 1**

Study 1 examined the blogosphere as a platform for identity construction and the roles that appearance and capital play within this construction. In-depth interviews were conducted with four self-identified fashion bloggers who had managed their blogs for at least one year. All participants resided in the United States and had accumulated between 11,900 and 20,900 followers. Analysis and interpretation of the interview data revealed three themes – cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency - that described their experiences in the blogosphere. For all participants in the study, their primary motivation for starting a blog was to inspire others through shared personal taste and fashion choices. This desire to bond with a group through verbal and non-verbal communication cues is known as cognitive intimacy (Maister & Tsakiris, 2016).

Cognitive intimacy is closely aligned with symbolic interaction theory, which states that symbols are given meaning by actors through social interactions (Aksan, Kisac, Aydin, & Demirbukan, 2009). Rather than view the self as “bounded” and “immutable,” postmodern research on symbolic interactionism positions the self as “reflexive” and “a product of socialization” (Robinson, 2007, p. 95). The bloggers in this study used their appearance, clothing items in particular, to communicate aspects of the self. While each participant expressed herself differently, the posts and images that they shared helped them bond with audience members in a meaningful way. These online

performances, where appearance was used as a non-verbal medium, allowed for the construction of a reflexive self, in that the identity could be crafted and recrafted based on feedback provided by the audience. As such, cognitive intimacy is considered a very important construct in maintaining a successful blog.

The bonding of groups through symbolic gestures is a common theme in research on fashion bloggers. For example, McQuarrie et al. (2013) explained that fashion bloggers capture the attention of those who are “pursuing related identity projects,” which suggests that appearance-related items displayed on blogs represent the ideas and values of a particular group or subculture (p. 140). Moreover, Chittenden (2010) described the importance of symbolic capital and the role it plays in fashion blogging. When bloggers assign meaning to capital (i.e., clothing) and communicate this meaning to an audience, it results in increased status, reputation, and popularity (Chittenden, 2010). Bonding with others through meaning helps bloggers develop an identity that reflects the values of a collective group. Thus, the first theme, cognitive intimacy, is consistent with existing theories and findings in prior research.

Affirmation, the second theme that emerged from the interviews, is the approval or support that is given when actions or behaviors are perceived as socially acceptable (Haggard & Williams, 1992). For the bloggers in this study, posting on a consistent basis, sharing relevant content, and engaging with audience members in a timely and consistent fashion was considered socially acceptable behavior. Two of the four participants had full-time jobs, which meant they had to adhere to a more structured schedule. Multiple outfits were captured in each photo shoot and content was prepared ahead of time to keep

their posts timely and consistent. Moreover, all participants responded to comments on their posts to show appreciation for their followers. Whether it was a question, superficial statement, or emoticon, all participants believed that acknowledging and responding to comments was integral to their identity development as a fashion blogger.

Prior research on identity construction in online environments, specifically research on bloggers, support these findings. According to Halvorsen et al. (2013), when an audience member provides feedback and receives a response, the blogger is viewed as trustworthy (Halvorsen et al., 2013), credible (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011), knowledgeable (Kretz, 2012), inspirational (Martinez Navarro & de Garcillan Lopez-Rua, 2016), influential (SanMiguel & Sadaba, 2018), and authentic (Marwick, 2013). Along the same lines, Thornton (1996) and Leigh et al. (2006) explored how capital can be used or displayed to increase social trust and authenticity in group settings. For fashion bloggers, the primary form of cultural capital is appearance-related items (i.e., clothing). As bloggers share these items, the audience evaluates the presentation, resulting in the acquisition and development of an online identity (Park & Lennon, 2008; Hutson, 2010; Mkono, 2012). Based on these findings, affirmation is a critical component of bloggers' identity construction.

The last theme, transparency, is the openness or disclosure provided by individuals or groups (McQuail, 2003; Mitchell & Steele, 2005). For the participants in this study, disclosure was discussed in two forms – personal and professional. Information shared about their everyday lives was referred to as 'personal disclosure' while sponsorships and endorsements with retailers were referred to as 'professional

disclosure.’ With regard to personal disclosure, all four participants felt apprehensive when they first started their blogs. Sharing information about their personal lives seemed “unnatural,” but they found ways to overcome it. One participant relied on family and friends for support while others realized that disclosure was part of their role as a fashion blogger. This form of identity expression, while difficult, helped the participating bloggers connect with their audience members. With regard to professional disclosure, participants discussed their experiences with sponsored products. Three of the four bloggers had engaged in some form of sponsorship, ranging from one-time collaborations to long-term partnerships. Regardless of the type, length, or number of sponsorships, participants believed that these opportunities helped validate their identities when the promoted products were in line with their image.

In accordance with identity theory, bloggers serve in multiple roles that comprise their constructed identities. Ranging from digital consumers (Fiore, 2008) to consultants (Rocamora, 2011) to stylists (Chittenden, 2010), these roles are selected or discarded based on associated meanings and the relevance these meanings have to their identity development. For example, sponsorship and endorsement deals are tied more to the consultant and stylist roles rather than the digital consumer role. While the consumer role is discarded in this scenario, research shows that bloggers are still considered authentic in the consultant and stylist roles when the sponsorship is disclosed, the needs of the audience are met, and reviews of the products are honest (Williams & Hodges, 2015). To expand on these qualitative findings, items for a new blogger authenticity scale were developed from online observations and in-depth interviews. This scale was then tested

from the perspective of the blog audience. The next three studies describe this process and explain how each step contributes to existing literature and research on authenticity.

### **Discussion of Study 2 and Study 3**

Study 2 confirmed dimensionality of the items developed from the observations and interviews. Once the initial items were screened by the dissertation committee and responses were collected from MTurk, an EFA was conducted to identify the number of dimensions that comprise the authenticity construct (Table 5). Items that did load on the appropriate dimension, as well as items that loaded on multiple factors, were removed from consideration. Results confirmed that there were three factors underlying authenticity: (1) cognitive intimacy, (2) affirmation, and (3) transparency (Table 6).

Study 3 further refined the items from the EFA (Table 11) through the use of a CFA in AMOS. In conducting the CFA, factor loadings were examined and the lowest loading items were removed one at a time. After each item was removed, model fit, reliability, and validity were assessed. If the removed item had a negative effect on the model, it was placed back in and another item with a low loading was removed. This process was repeated until the model had acceptable fit and all three factors had convergent and discriminant validity. Final results, based on three item scales for cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency, revealed acceptable model fit ( $\chi^2 = 312.62$  ( $p = 0.00$ );  $DF = 116$ ;  $CFI = .901$ ;  $RMSEA = .083$ ;  $SRMR = .068$ ), as well as convergent and discriminant validity (Table 12) (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005).

Overall, the CFA confirmed the findings from the observations, interviews, and EFA. The factors identified in these studies appear to support existing theories (identity

theory, symbolic interaction theory) (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000) and contribute to the literature on identity (role identity, dramaturgy), as well as the literature on concepts related to identity (appearance, authenticity, capital) (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Bourdieu, 1986; Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1962).

Items included in the first factor, cognitive intimacy, focus on bonding and building relationships with the blogger. For example, *I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts* suggests that the blogger and audience member feel like they are old friends. Prior research on dramaturgy, symbolic interactionism, and appearance explain how individuals bond through symbolic gestures in social situations (Aksan et al., 2009; Goffman, 1959; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Roach & Eicher, 1992; Stone, 1962). While this research has been referenced in studies about identity development, it has not been used to explore the authenticity of blogger identities. Thus, the scale items for cognitive intimacy can be used to assess blogger authenticity from direct and indirect interactions on the blog.

Items included in the second factor, affirmation, focus on socially acceptable behaviors employed by the blogger. For instance, *I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing* implies that the blogger engages in behaviors that are not only acceptable but expected by the audience. Posting on a consistent basis, sharing relevant content, and engaging with audience members were all considered common practices in blogging. Existing literature on interpersonal relationships describes these interactions as one-way (parasocial interaction) or two-way (psychological closeness). While one-way and two-way interactions have been examined in terms of

blog engagement (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011; Halvorsen et al., 2013; Kretz, 2012; Martinez Navarro & de Garcillan Lopez-Rua, 2016; Marwick, 2013; SanMiguel & Sadaba, 2018) and repeated blog exposure (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011), they have not been used to examine blogger authenticity. As such, the scale items developed by the current study to assess affirmation can be used to determine the degree to which socially acceptable behaviors impact the authenticity of fashion bloggers.

Items included in the third factor, transparency, focus on the openness and disclosure between individuals or groups. For example, *The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored* indicates that the blogger is honest about sponsorship and endorsement deals. This type of disclosure is discussed in prior research about bloggers, specifically studies that focus on the acclimation of roles (Williams & Hodges, 2015) and the accumulation of capital (Chittenden, 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Pedroni, 2015). Moreover, identity theory has contributed to the understanding of disclosure in terms of role acceptance. Although existing research addresses this concept, the methods used to explore the topic are mostly qualitative. To expand the scope, the scale items for transparency can be used to assess the authenticity of bloggers when sponsored products are disclosed to an audience.

#### **Discussion of Study 4**

Study 4 tested the authenticity scale with two hypothesized predictors – blogger responsiveness and number of sponsorships – to assess validity of the construct. Because the EFA and CFA revealed three factors of authenticity, the tests were conducted using each factor. As expected, blogger responsiveness (H1a-c) had a significant positive

relationship with cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency (Table 14). In essence, when bloggers respond to audience members, it strengthens their perception of authenticity through bonding, socially acceptable behaviors, and disclosure practices. This finding supports the notion that audience members who have a real or perceived relationship, through one-way or two-way interactions, think of bloggers as friends (Hahn & Lee, 2014), consider them trustworthy (Halvorsen et al., 2013) and view them as authentic (Marwick, 2013).

However, the number of sponsorships (H2a-c) had a non-significant relationship with cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency (Table 14). Regardless of the number of sponsorships, audience members' perception of authenticity was not positively or negatively impacted. This finding conflicts with prior research, which suggests that bloggers with a large number of sponsorships are viewed as less authentic than those with fewer sponsorships (Williams & Hodges, 2015). One possible explanation is that audience members are unable to distinguish sponsored posts from non-sponsored posts when products align with the blogger's image, which appears to be the case in this study.

Lastly, males were compared to females on the three factors. Results revealed a significant difference between males and females on cognitive intimacy, but a non-significant difference on affirmation and transparency (Tables 15 and 16). This finding is consistent with Ragins and Cotton (1991) who state that men tend to be more aggressive than women when it comes to initiating relationships. As it pertains to this study, male audience members are more likely to perceive a stronger bond with the blogger when thoughts and ideas are shared. With regard to affirmation and transparency, the non-



significant difference may be a result of similar expectations when it comes to bloggers engaging in socially acceptable behaviors and disclosing sponsorships.

### **Summary of Discussion**

Overall, the findings from the studies (Study 1 – 4) suggest the following: (1) Themes from the in-depth interviews revealed three dimensions of blogger authenticity: cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency (Study 1), (2) The EFA provided support for these proposed dimensions while the CFA confirmed these dimensions (Study 2 – 3), (3) A significant positive relationship was present between blogger responsiveness and all three dimensions of authenticity (Study 4), (4) A non-significant relationship was present between number of sponsorships and all three dimensions of authenticity (Study 4), and (5) A significant difference was present between males and females on the cognitive intimacy dimension of authenticity (Study 4).

### **Implications**

In this section, theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are discussed. Theoretical implications are explained in terms of the contributions made to existing theory and gaps addressed in the literature. Managerial implications are discussed in terms of the application and use of this information by marketing practitioners.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this dissertation contribute to existing theory and literature in four ways. First, a mixed-methods approach was used to develop a blogger authenticity scale. Specifically, themes from the in-depth interviews (Study 1) were used to identify

proposed dimensions and statistical techniques (Study 2 – 4) were used to support and confirm these dimensions. While this approach is not uncommon, particularly in scale development studies, and identity-related scales have been developed in the past, most of the research on identity is still qualitative in nature, particularly as it relates to fashion bloggers. Thus, this scale adds a new dimension to existing theory (symbolic interactionist theory, identity theory) and the research on identity by addressing fashion bloggers as a relevant and important group of consumers.

Second, blogger responsiveness was shown to have a significant positive relationship with all three dimensions of blogger authenticity (Study 4). During the in-depth interviews, participants discussed the role of the blog audience in the creation and maintenance of their online identities. Audience members have been the central focus of a number of studies on parasocial interaction and psychological closeness (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Hahn & Lee, 2014), which describe the impact that one-sided and two-sided relationships have on media personalities and their respective audiences. However, few studies address the roles and behaviors of fashion bloggers and how they impact the way audiences perceive the authenticity of their identities. Therefore, this dissertation addresses a gap in the literature by providing quantitative support to the notion that bloggers are considered friends (Hahn & Lee, 2014), trustworthy (Halvorsen et al., 2013), and authentic (Marwick, 2013), when a real or perceived relationship is present.

Third, number of sponsorships was shown to have a non-significant relationship with all three dimensions of blogger authenticity (Study 4). This finding is inconsistent

with the in-depth interviews, where participants indicated that sponsorships validate their online identities when the products are in line with their image. It also conflicts with prior research, which suggests that bloggers with a large number of sponsorships appear less authentic than those with fewer sponsorships (Williams & Hodges, 2015). This dissertation provides a different perspective on the role of endorsement and sponsorship deals in bloggers' identity development, as well as new insight into the perception of the authenticity of these identities. This study is important, as it contributes to the advancement of research on identity.

Lastly, male audience members were more likely than female audience members to perceive a stronger bond with the blogger when thoughts and ideas were shared on the blog (Study 4). To date, few studies on fashion bloggers address gender differences, specifically as it pertains to audience members' perceptions and the role they play in the development and maintenance of blogger identities. However, prior research indicates that males are more aggressive and females are more passive when initiating relationships (Ragins and Cotton, 1991). As such, this finding contributes in two ways; it addresses a gap in the literature (examines the differences between males and females on building relationships with bloggers) and provides insight into an area that needs further investigation. The practical application and use of these findings is discussed more in the next section.

### **Managerial Implications**

These findings also have practical applications that are relevant to marketing practitioners. First, themes from the in-depth interviews identified three dimensions of

authenticity (cognitive intimacy, affirmation, and transparency) that focus on bonding with others, engaging in socially acceptable behaviors, and disclosing sponsorships. Prior research indicates that consumers search for authenticity in consumption in response to “standardization and homogenization in the marketplace” (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). Fashion bloggers provide an escape from these traditional marketing practices. Rather than promote products in a conventional way, they use their blogs as an informal platform to express thoughts and opinions. If the audience believes these thoughts and opinions are honest, the blogger is viewed as credible, trustworthy, and authentic (Williams & Hodges, 2015). It is important that marketers understand the attributes that are critical to bloggers’ identity development, as it will help them select representatives for their brands who are able to communicate with the audience in a way that is perceived as real and authentic.

While these attributes were considered important components of authenticity, responsiveness was also critical in consumers’ evaluation of fashion bloggers. When bloggers engage with audience members, meaning they respond to questions and comments, the interactions are perceived to be real. According to Becker et al. (2019), when experiences are real or, at the very least, perceived to be real, they are considered authentic. This finding is important to marketers, as many bloggers employ marketing agencies to respond to audience members. Findings from this study indicate a positive relationship between blogger responsiveness and all three dimensions of authenticity. Thus, when selecting fashion bloggers as brand ambassadors, marketers should consider the activity level of the blogger, including the type of responses provided and the degree

to which questions and comments are addressed on the blog. Furthermore, marketers should direct their attention toward the connection that fashion bloggers have with male audience members. Findings suggest that males perceive a stronger bond with bloggers than their female counterparts when posts and images are shared on blogs.

According to Lueck (2015), social media celebrities are often thought of as authentic customers who promote products they would purchase for themselves. In this dissertation, participants used cultural capital (i.e., clothing), as well as other appearance-related items (i.e., makeup), to create and maintain their online identities. While organic posts were more common, sponsored posts were incorporated if they aligned with the blogger's image. For many bloggers, the acceptance of sponsorships and endorsements is common. It allows them to receive compensation in exchange for posts (Williams & Hodges, 2015) and expand networks by connecting with companies and brands beyond the occasional like or comment (Boerman et al., 2017). While engaging in a large number of sponsorships was not recommended in the in-depth interviews or literature, findings from the survey revealed that the number of sponsorships did not positively or negatively impact audience members' perception of blogger identities. This information is important to marketers, as it is common practice for retailers to partner with fashion bloggers to promote and sell products. Because blogger authenticity does not appear to be affected by the number of sponsorships, retailers can request to partner with bloggers without concern that consumers will view the blogger as inauthentic or dismiss the brand for engaging in a paid sponsorship deal.

## Limitations and Future Research

While the findings of this dissertation contribute to existing theory, address gaps in the literature, and provide suggestions for marketing practitioners, there are a few limitations and opportunities for future research. First, the findings have the following sample limitations: (1) in-depth interviews were only conducted with four fashion bloggers who reside in the United States, (2) all participants in the in-depth interviews were female, (3) all survey data were collected from MTurk participants who reside in the United States, and (4) the blogger authenticity scale was only tested with one sample after the EFA and CFA. Future studies can expand on this research by using a more demographically diverse sample, collecting data through other means (i.e., Qualtrics, college students), and testing the scale with other samples and constructs.

Additionally, MTurk participants may have experienced practice effects (i.e., fatigue) that impacted their responses. To strengthen the findings, researchers can replicate the study with different samples over an extended period of time. Given that this study is focused on the use of social media and practices change frequently, the extended time frame may produce different perspectives than data collected in a short time frame.

Moreover, future studies could further investigate the impact that the number of sponsorships has on blogger authenticity. In this study, the second hypothesis ( $H_2$ : *The number of sponsorships will have a negative relationship with blogger authenticity*) was not supported. Results revealed that the number of sponsorships did not positively or negatively impact the authenticity of fashion bloggers. This finding conflicted with prior research (Williams & Hodges, 2015) and the in-depth interviews, where some bloggers

strongly believed that engaging in too many sponsorships would have a negative impact on their message. Future studies could place a time restriction with the questions (i.e., *Roughly, how many of the posts made by your favorite fashion blogger/influencer are sponsored per week?*) or ask about the number of *disclosed* sponsorships to prompt a deeper evaluation of the blogger. Lastly, future research could further examine the perceived bond that males have with fashion bloggers. In this study, males appeared to perceive a stronger bond with bloggers than their female counterparts. An experimental design could be used to determine the cause of these differences, as well as explain why a difference between genders was not present with affirmation and transparency.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

**Interview Schedule: Fashion Bloggers**

*Owning a Blog*

1. Describe your blog- content, focus, audience, goals.
2. When did you create your blog?
3. Did you have professional assistance with the initial set up or did you develop the blog yourself?
4. Describe your blog and explain why you decided to start blogging.
5. Did someone or something specific inspire you? If so, who?
6. What are some of your skills/strengths that helped you start blogging?
7. How much of your time is spent blogging?
8. How do you manage this time to run your blog efficiently?
9. Do you have staff members that help you?
10. Describe a typical day in your life as a blogger.
11. What do you do when you are not working on your blog?

*Clothing and Style Preferences*

12. When did you become interested in fashion?
13. Has it changed or impacted your life? If so, in what ways?
14. How would you describe your own personal style?
15. Where do you buy your clothes?
16. Who is your biggest fashion inspiration and why?

17. What sets your style apart from other fashion bloggers?
18. Which items do you spend the most money on?
19. What are the clothing items that are the most important to you?
20. What is your favorite outfit that you have posted so far?

#### *Blog Posts*

21. How many times per week do you post on your blog?
22. Where do you find inspiration for your blog posts?
23. Do you include photos in your blog posts? If so, who takes your photos  
(professionals, family members, friends) and where are they taken?
24. What role do these photos play in your message?
25. What do you hope these posts will communicate to audience members?
26. How often do you communicate with your audience members after a post is made  
public?
27. How do you communicate authenticity through your blog?
28. How do you communicate your knowledge of fashion and taste of fashion through  
your blog?

#### *Community and Communication*

29. How do you capture the attention of your audience?
30. How do you keep them engaged?
31. On average, how many comments do you receive per post?
32. What is the comment threshold that makes a post successful?

33. What is your existing social media strategy? For example, do you use other platforms to promote your blog? If so, please explain.
34. Which social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) increase traffic to your blog? How do you measure your influence through these platforms?
35. Do you plan to grow your blog and expand readership in the future? Why or why not?

#### *Sponsorships*

36. Do retailers send items to feature on your blog? If so, how many items do you receive per week? Per month?
37. Do you receive compensation for the promotion of these items? If so, what type(s) have you received?
38. Has the sponsorship of products led to long-term endorsement deals? (books, clothing lines, invites to fashion week) If so, please explain.
39. How have your audience members responded to these sponsorships? Has it affected the popularity of your blog? If so, please explain.
40. Do you plan to collaborate with retailers in the future? If so, what do you hope to gain from these partnerships?

#### *Experiences and Perceptions*

41. Are you a full-time blogger or do you blog as a hobby?
42. What is the biggest difference in your life now that you are a blogger?
43. What is the most challenging aspect of being a fashion blogger?
44. What is the most rewarding aspect of being a fashion blogger?

- 45. Do you have any specific goals for the next year? Five years?
- 46. What advice would you give to a new blogger?
- 47. Is there anything you wish you had known at the beginning of your blogging journey that you know now?

*Blogs as a Social Media Platform*

- 48. What is the best service a blogger can provide through her blog?
- 49. What makes blogs different from other types of social media? (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube)
- 50. Why do you think blogs are a popular form of social media?
- 51. Where do you think blogging will be in the next ten years? (new technologies, platforms, partnerships)
- 52. Is there anything else that you think is important that we did not talk about?

### **Interview Schedule: Fashion Bloggers as Audience Members**

1. How long have you been part of the blogging community?

#### *Perceptions of Blogs*

2. How many blogs do you follow? What are your main considerations when selecting a blog to follow?
3. Do you visit blogs on a daily basis? Weekly?
4. What factors impact the amount of attention you give to a blog?
5. Are most of the blogs you follow fashion-related or do the topics vary? If the topics vary, what other types of blogs do you look at? What is attractive about these blogs?
6. What kind of information do you look for when visiting a fashion blog?
7. Is it important for the blogger to engage with you about the information on her blog?
8. Do you comment on the fashion blogs that you visit? If so, how often? Are the responses typically positive or negative?
9. Do you use other forms of social media besides blogs?

#### *Blog experiences*

10. Talk about your favorite fashion blog. What makes it your favorite?
11. Describe what you like and dislike about others' fashion blogs.
12. Have you ever purchased a clothing item displayed on a fashion blog? If so, please describe this experience. What did you buy? Why did you buy it? How much did it cost?

13. Have you ever purchased a clothing item when it appeared as a sponsored, or paid, advertisement on a fashion blog? If so, did the item match the description on the blog? Why or why not?
14. Describe the best and worst products you have purchased from a fashion blog. What made the products good or bad?

*Community and Communication*

15. What do the words “fashion blogger” mean to you?
16. Do you communicate with blog members through others’ fashion blogs? (blogger, audience members) If so, what are some of the things you discuss?
17. Describe the relationship you have with other fashion bloggers and members of the blogging community.
18. Do you communicate with blog members through other social media outlets owned by the blogger? If so, which ones do you use and what are some of the things you discuss?
19. As an audience member, how do you feel about fashion bloggers? Please explain.
20. As an audience member, how do you feel about products sold on fashion blogs? Are they within your price range? Do they fit with your style?
21. As an audience member, how do you feel about the content posted to fashion blogs? (posts, videos, images) Is it helpful? Do you use it to make decisions about products?

*Blog comparison*

22. Describe your ideal fashion blog. What components does it use? (videos, photographs) What style does the blogger have? What are the interactions like?
23. Describe a rival blog that is comparable to yours. What are the similarities? Differences?
24. If another fashion blogger copies an outfit from your blog and displays it on her blog the next day, what is your response?
25. If another fashion blogger makes negative comments about your blog in the online community, what is your response? Are there any rules in the blogosphere that dictate this type of behavior?
26. Is there anything else that you think is important that we did not talk about?



## APPENDIX B

### CONSENT FORM

#### THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

##### CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: I blog, therefore I am...

Project Director: Miranda Williams, PhD Student

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Nancy Nelson Hodges

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

##### **What is the study about?**

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to explore how bloggers use dress to construct their identity within the context of the blogosphere.

##### **Why are you asking me?**

I am asking you to participate because you are at least 18 years of age, have been part of the fashion blogging community for at least one year, and your experiences will provide unique insight into the topic.

##### **What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

I will ask you to participate in three to four 1 to 2 hour interviews, in which you will discuss your experiences with fashion blogging. In addition, I will ask you to provide photos of outfits displayed on your blog. Lastly, I will ask you to be available for a review of your interview transcripts once they are completed. This review will take approximately 1 hour.

##### **Is there any audio/video recording?**

Digital audio recording will be used to ensure reliability of the data collected and to capture your perspectives of fashion blogging. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

##### **What are the dangers to me?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. As stated above, there is a slight risk of a breach of confidentiality. Measures that will be implemented to minimize this risk are described in the confidentiality section below.

If you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact Miranda Williams at 252-916-9324 or [mwilli8@uncg.edu](mailto:mwilli8@uncg.edu). You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Nancy Hodges at 336-256-0291 or [nancy\\_hodges@uncg.edu](mailto:nancy_hodges@uncg.edu).

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855) 251-2351.

Approved IRB  
9/14/15

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

The primary benefit to society may be contributing to the understanding of how fashion bloggers develop online identities within the context of the blogosphere.

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There is no compensation for participating in this study, nor does it cost anything to participate in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

Audio files will be kept on a password-protected computer. A master list of participants will be stored in a password-protected file that will be kept separate from other data that are collected. Participants will not be identified by name when data are disseminated. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms. No more than seven years after the close of the study, the audio files will be erased. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

All photographs will be kept on a password-protected computer. Your face will not be exposed in the photographs in order to protect your confidentiality.

Although measures are taken to protect your information, absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when you are finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data, which has been collected, be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By participating in the interview, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By participating in the interview, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individuals specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Miranda Williams.

Approved IRB  
9/14/15


## APPENDIX C

### IRB APPROVAL

To: Miranda Williams  
Cons, Apparel, and Ret Stds  
1303 Cedar Lane Greenville, NC 27858

From: UNCG IRB

Date: 2/13/2019

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption (modification)   
Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation  
Study #: 15-0402  
Study Title: I blog, therefore I am: Exploring the identities of fashion bloggers

This submission has been reviewed by the IRB and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

APPENDIX D

SCALE DEVELOPMENT SURVEY



Date \_\_\_\_\_ No. \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE NOTE: TO QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY, YOU MUST HAVE BEEN FOLLOWING A FASHION BLOGGER/INFLUENCER FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS.

Dear Participants,

We are conducting a study about consumers' involvement with fashion blogs. **Your participation is completely voluntary.** There is no risk or benefit to you for choosing to take part in this survey. Please remember there are no right or wrong answers to the questions and **the responses you provide will be kept confidential.** Should you feel uncomfortable during any part of the survey, you may stop filling it out at any time. If you have questions, please feel free to contact Miranda Williams (252-916-9324, mswilli8@uncg.edu) or Dr. James Boles (336-334-4413, jsboles@uncg.edu). Additionally, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board at 336-256-0253. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Department of Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies

Miranda Williams, Ph.D. Candidate

James Boles, Ph.D., Professor

"Fashion influencers" are individuals who influence the purchasing behavior of others by creating and sharing fashion-related content (i.e., Gal Meets Glam: <http://galmeetsglam.com/>). **Have you ever visited the blog of a fashion blogger/influencer?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Have you followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer for AT LEAST SIX MONTHS?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How long have you followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer?

- ☐ Less than a year
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 4-6 years
- ☐ 7-9 years
- ☐ 10+ years

**Part I.** Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is sincere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like to connect with the blogger/influencer by recreating outfits that I see in posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is honest with their thoughts and opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When the blogger/influencer posts content, the information is shared in a way that bonds their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I question the credibility of the blogger/influencer when full disclosure is not provided in the post	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is credible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/ influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think the blogger is authentic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when they collaborate with retail partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer presents themselves in a socially acceptable manner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel similar to the blogger/influencer in terms of taste and knowledge of fashion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are interesting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their thoughts and opinions of products	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading their posts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is appealing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When I read posts shared by the blogger/influencer, I feel I am part of the group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personally, I do not like to see sponsored items as the blogger's/influencer's reviews could not be honest	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger is transparent with their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is believable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I view the blogger/influencer as a legitimate source of fashion knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/ influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think the blogger/influencer builds trust with their audience when they disclose that a product is sponsored	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is relatable through their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is genuine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel connected to the blogger/influencer through their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When the blogger/influencer posts about a sponsored product, I think they are honest with their review of the product	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I view the blogger/influencer as credible when they share unedited photos that display their mood and appearance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are appropriate for their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When the blogger/influencer shares their thoughts about an item, it helps me make up my mind about the item	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel like the blogger connects and bonds with their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is unbiased with their review of sponsored products	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think of the blogger/influencer as an old friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I support the blogger/influencer by commenting on their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like to mimic the look of the blogger/influencer that I see in posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer responds to comments and/or questions I have about their posts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/ influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The blogger/influencer openly discusses their personal style through posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer never collaborates with retail partners to promote sponsored products	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I develop thoughts about fashion by reading posts shared by the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel like the blogger receives approval and support from their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer has admirable qualities that are validated through their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer seems to understand things I want to know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Part II.** We request general demographic information to help with our analysis. It will not be used to identify the source of responses.

What is your gender?

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

What is your age?

☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35-44 ☐ 45-54 ☐ 55-64 ☐ 65+

What is your ethnicity? (You can select more than one answer).

☐ White  
☐ Black or African American  
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native  
☐ Asian  
☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander  
☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_



What is your marital status?

- ☐ Single/never married
- ☐ Married or in a domestic partnership
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Separated

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (If you are currently enrolled in school, please indicate the highest degree you have *received*.)

- ☐ Less than a high school diploma
- ☐ High school degree or equivalent (i.e., GED)
- ☐ Some college, no degree
- ☐ Associate degree (i.e., AA, AS)
- ☐ Bachelor's degree (i.e., BA, BS)
- ☐ Master's degree (i.e., MA, MS, MEd)
- ☐ Professional degree (i.e., MD, DDS, DVM)
- ☐ Doctorate (i.e., PhD, EdD)

What is your current employment status?

- ☐ Employed full-time (40 or more hours per week)
- ☐ Employed part-time (up to 39 hours per week)
- ☐ Unemployed looking for work
- ☐ Unemployed not looking for work
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Homemaker
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unable to work

What is your household's monthly gross income?

- ☐ \$999 and below
- ☐ \$1,000 to \$2,999
- ☐ \$3,000 to \$4,999
- ☐ \$5,000 to \$6,999
- ☐ \$7,000 and above

**END OF SURVEY**

**Thank you for your participation 😊**

## APPENDIX E

### SURVEY TO TEST THE SCALE

**(Includes Blogger Responsiveness and Number of Sponsorships)**



Date\_\_\_\_\_No.\_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE NOTE: TO QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY, YOU MUST HAVE BEEN FOLLOWING A FASHION BLOGGER/INFLUENCER FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS.

Dear Participants,

We are conducting a study about consumers' involvement with fashion blogs. **Your participation is completely voluntary.** There is no risk or benefit to you for choosing to take part in this survey. Please remember there are no right or wrong answers to the questions and **the responses you provide will be kept confidential.** Should you feel uncomfortable during any part of the survey, you may stop filling it out at any time. If you have questions, please feel free to contact Miranda Williams (252-916-9324, mswilli8@uncg.edu) or Dr. James Boles (336-334-4413, jsboles@uncg.edu). Additionally, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board at 336-256-0253. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Department of Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies

Miranda Williams, Ph.D. Candidate

James Boles, Ph.D., Professor

"Fashion influencers" are individuals who influence the purchasing behavior of others by creating and sharing fashion-related content (i.e., Gal Meets Glam: <http://galmeetsglam.com/>). **Have you ever visited the blog of a fashion blogger/influencer?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Have you followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer for AT LEAST SIX MONTHS?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How long have you followed your favorite fashion blogger/influencer?

- ☐ Less than a year
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ 4-6 years
- ☐ 7-9 years
- ☐ 10+ years

## Part I. Responsiveness

Please describe your feelings about receiving responses from your favorite fashion blogger/influencer.

Unimportant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Important
Of no concern to me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Of concern to me
Means nothing to me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Means a lot to me
Does not matter to me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Matters to me
Insignificant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Significant

Please describe the responsiveness of your favorite fashion blogger/influencer.

Unresponsive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Responsive
Not willing to reply	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Willing to reply
Not interactive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Interactive
Does not answer comments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Answers comments

## Part II. Sponsorship

Are you aware of any companies or brands that your favorite fashion blogger/influencer has sponsored?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Describe the last sponsorship of your favorite fashion blogger/influencer. If you are not aware of a sponsorship, put N/A.

---

---

Roughly, how many companies or brands have been sponsored by your favorite fashion blogger/influencer? If you are not aware of a sponsorship, put 0.

---

Roughly, how many of the posts made by your favorite fashion blogger/influencer are sponsored?

A little	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	A lot
Few	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Many
Not many	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very many

**Part III.** Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is sincere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like to connect with the blogger/influencer by recreating outfits that I see in posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, my impression of the blogger/influencer is favorable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is honest with their thoughts and opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are convincing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When the blogger/influencer posts content, the information is shared in a way that bonds their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I question the credibility of the blogger/influencer when full disclosure is not provided in the post	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is credible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel like I know the blogger/influencer when I read their posts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/ influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think the blogger is authentic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when they collaborate with retail partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer presents themselves in a socially acceptable manner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel similar to the blogger/influencer in terms of taste and knowledge of fashion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are interesting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is transparent with their thoughts and opinions of products	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I want to meet the blogger/influencer in person after reading their posts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is appealing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When I read posts shared by the blogger/influencer, I feel I am part of the group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personally, I do not like to see sponsored items as the blogger's/influencer's reviews could not be honest	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer provides full disclosure when a product is sponsored	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger is transparent with their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is believable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I view the blogger/influencer as a legitimate source of fashion knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/ influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think the blogger/influencer builds trust with their audience when they disclose that a product is sponsored	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is relatable through their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Based on their posts and images, I think the blogger/influencer is genuine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel connected to the blogger/influencer through their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When the blogger/influencer posts about a sponsored product, I think they are honest with their review of the product	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I view the blogger/influencer as credible when they share unedited photos that display their mood and appearance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the posts and images shared by the blogger/influencer are appropriate for their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When the blogger/influencer shares their thoughts about an item, it helps me make up my mind about the item	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel like the blogger connects and bonds with their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer is unbiased with their review of sponsored products	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think of the blogger/influencer as an old friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I support the blogger/influencer by commenting on their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like to mimic the look of the blogger/influencer that I see in posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer responds to comments and/or questions I have about their posts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/ influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The blogger/influencer openly discusses their personal style through posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer never collaborates with retail partners to promote sponsored products	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I develop thoughts about fashion by reading posts shared by the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel like the blogger receives approval and support from their audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the blogger/influencer has admirable qualities that are validated through their posts and images	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer seems to understand things I want to know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am satisfied with my decision to visit the page of the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer is primarily interested in their own welfare	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer has more benefits than other bloggers/influencers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I say positive things to other people about the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If I had to do it all over again, I would still visit the page of the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are times when the blogger/influencer cannot be trusted	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like to visit the page of the blogger/influencer more than other bloggers/influencers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I recommend the blogger/influencer to someone who seeks fashion advice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on prior interactions with your favorite fashion blogger/ influencer.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My choice to visit the page of the blogger/influencer was a wise one	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The blogger/influencer is perfectly honest with me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I intend to visit the page of the blogger/influencer in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I encourage friends and family to visit the page of the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel good about my decision to visit the page of the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel that I can trust the blogger/influencer completely	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When I need fashion advice, I visit the page of the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I say positive things to other people about the products promoted by the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think that I did the right thing when I decided to visit the page of the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel that the blogger/influencer does not show me enough consideration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I recommend products promoted by the blogger/influencer to someone who seeks fashion advice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I encourage friends and family to buy products promoted by the blogger/influencer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



**Part IV.** Please describe your feelings about the products promoted by your favorite fashion blogger/influencer.

Definitely do not intend to buy item	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely intend to buy item
Very low purchase intent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very high purchase intent
Definitely will not buy them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely will buy them
Probably will not buy them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Probably will buy them

**Part V.** We request general demographic information to help with our analysis. It will not be used to identify the source of responses.

What is your gender?

☐ Male      ☐ Female      ☐ Other

What is your age?

☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35-44 ☐ 45-54 ☐ 55-64 ☐ 65+

What is your ethnicity? (You can select more than one answer).

☐ White  
☐ Black or African American  
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native  
☐ Asian  
☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander  
☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your marital status?

☐ Single/never married  
☐ Married or in a domestic partnership  
☐ Widowed  
☐ Divorced  
☐ Separated

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (If you are currently enrolled in school, please indicate the highest degree you have *received*.)

- ☐ Less than a high school diploma
- ☐ High school degree or equivalent (i.e., GED)
- ☐ Some college, no degree
- ☐ Associate degree (i.e., AA, AS)
- ☐ Bachelor's degree (i.e., BA, BS)
- ☐ Master's degree (i.e., MA, MS, MEd)
- ☐ Professional degree (i.e., MD, DDS, DVM)
- ☐ Doctorate (i.e., PhD, EdD)

What is your current employment status?

- ☐ Employed full-time (40 or more hours per week)
- ☐ Employed part-time (up to 39 hours per week)
- ☐ Unemployed looking for work
- ☐ Unemployed not looking for work
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Homemaker
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unable to work

What is your household's monthly gross income?

- ☐ \$999 and below
- ☐ \$1,000 to \$2,999
- ☐ \$3,000 to \$4,999
- ☐ \$5,000 to \$6,999
- ☐ \$7,000 and above

**END OF SURVEY**

**Thank you for your participation 😊**